

Two Such People



The Adventures of John Steed and Emma Peel

THE AVENGERS

By Caroline Miniscule

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Alpha Omega
aka The Transformed Man

A drama in five acts

When John Steed teamed up with Emma Peel, his persona changed dramatically from what it was during his partnership with Cathy Gale. This story explains that transformation.

- Act One: Auto-de-Fe - Cathy Gale goes on holiday
Act Two: Every Steed Needs a Knight - John Steed meets Emma Peel
Act Three: The Transformed Man: Before - Steed and Cathy Gale go to *The Murder Market*
Act Four: Every Knight Needs a Steed - Emma Peel meets Max Prendergast
Act Five: The Transformed Man: After: Emma Peel joins the Circus

Act One: What a day, what a day, for an Auto-de-Fe

I. London, England. 1964

Brilliant golden flames leapt everywhere about her. The heat seared her skin. Cathy Gale stood in the center of the room, spinning around, eyes searching desperately for a way out. There was none. She was doomed...she would be burned to death. She could barely breathe, her lungs seared with every intake of air....



No, it couldn't end this way. Standing here spinning like a top and waiting for the end. She had to try something! Cathy grit her teeth in determination. There! That way....that's the way she would go. She started running forward, low down, with smoke pouring over her, the heat melting her shoes...she wasn't going to make it....she stumbled forward nevertheless...keep going...keep going or else!

Suddenly a strong arm was around her, helping her to her feet....Steed! Steed had come at last...Cathy forced her eyes open...there was the familiar bowler, but below that was not Steed's sardonic smile but the gaping grin of a skeleton, with flames glowing in the eyeless sockets.....one skeletal hand held her up and the other hand held a gleaming scythe.

Anger surged through her and she yelled at the thing furiously, "Steed!" She began to beat

at the thing furiously, striking to kill.

Cathy Gale jerked up in bed, eyes wide open, mouth open in a soundless scream. Her breasts heaved as she forced herself to suck in air. Just a dream....just a dream....She had flung off all her covers during her dream...but she was hot...her skin was burning up, but inside she felt the coldness of the grave.

Cathy swung out of bed and strode into her bathroom, stepped into the shower and turned on the water without bothering to undress. What was happening to her? She had faced death many times in her life, and defeated it every time. Even before she'd started working with John Steed and his Department S she'd faced death...the death of a charging rhino or lion...and for two years she'd faced death at the hands of violent men and had come through unscathed, physically and mentally.

But her most recent escape from the burning houseboat...that had scarred her terribly. Not physically, of course, her burns had been only superficial. But mentally....mentally her confidence was shaken..not in herself, surely...but in John Steed....Steed was the grim reaper with a bowler instead of a cowl and an umbrella instead of a scythe...and a gleaming, heartless smile.

Cathy took a deep breath. Irrational...irrational feelings...Steed had put her in danger many a time but had never let her down...he put himself in danger as well and knew that she'd pull his fat out of the fire if need be....Cathy laughed weakly...fire, fire...'what a day, what a day for an auto de fe....'



"Now this is getting ridiculous," she said aloud, "when I start singing *Candide* I know there's something wrong."

She stripped, wrapped herself in a kimono and went into her library. The walls were lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, interspersed among the books were African tribal masks and various other memorabilia from her time in Kenya. On a tremendously large 'lazy Susan' placed in front of her comfy leather chair were arranged four chess sets, each in various stages of play.

A pile of letters and postcards lay on one table, for a week she had not looked at her mail...now she sorted through the envelopes and took out only the postcards, for they were chess-by-mail postcards. She glanced through them, and found one signed Dan Dare. Cathy smiled. 'Dan Dare' was the name of the British astronaut who appeared in the comic strips. It was an in-joke between her and a scientist

friend, a man who intended to build and man the first rocket ship into space. She hadn't heard from him in over two months. He was in the Bahamas, doing some kind of work at the United States missile tracking station there.

Cathy spun the lazy Susan so that Dan's board was in front of her - each of the boards she used had been designed by her, using her wood-carving skills, to reflect the personality of her opponent....for games with Dan she had carved a space motif - rocket ships straight out of Dan Dare for the pawns, things like that. She read Dan's move and played the move on the board.

Absently, while she studied the board, she took a cigarette from its box and flicked her lighter. Suddenly her eyes were caught by that flickering flame and she stared at it, mesmerized. Abruptly she snapped the lighter shut, grabbed up her cigarettes and tossed them into the rubbish bin. She took a long, calming breath. She closed her eyes, took another breath, visualized calmness returning to her body.

Something would have to be done. These nightmares were coming more frequently and becoming worse and worse. Never before had she seen Steed as the Grim Reaper, but obviously in her sub-conscious that was now how she thought of him...and her thoughts for him, sub-consciously at least, were thoughts of hatred.

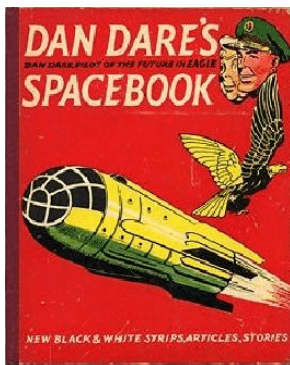
But not hatred for Steed, Cathy told herself. Hatred for herself, hatred that she had lived through her ordeal by fire but was now afraid, afraid. Afraid that when she had to confront death again she would not have the courage to do so.

"I need a vacation," she told herself. "I need to test myself. Scuba diving...sky diving...that's the ticket. Live life to the edge and prove to myself that I'm not turning into a coward....and...get away from Steed."

She hadn't seen Steed since it had happened. It would be best if she did not see him. Cathy nodded to herself as she spun the lazy Susan around idly, watching the chess boards spin around helplessly at her whim.



The morning sun arrived while Cathy was still engrossed over her chessboards - this time with her countering moves to her opponents. As soon as she noticed the sun rising over the horizon she went out into her yard to watch the sunrise, breathing in deeply of the sweet smelling air.



She was calm now. She'd made her decision. She went back to bed, set her alarm for ten in the morning, and then nestled under the covers and allowed herself to drift to sleep. She did not fear the fiery dreams, and she did not have any.

When she wakened at ten o'clock she showered again, dressed, and then called her travel agent and booked passage to the Bahamas. Scuba diving, sky diving, and she'd visit Dan Dare and listen to his dreams for the stars.

She spent the rest of the afternoon at the library, researching the history of the Bahamas and making plans for things she'd like to see. When she returned home there was a message on her answer phone from Steed, inviting her to tea the next day. Cathy nodded to herself slowly. Tomorrow was the day she would break away.

She was round to Steed flat's on the dot of the time he had suggested. Knowing her knack for punctuality he'd already had the tea on the boil, and handed her a cup. As she drank, Steed pattered around his flat somewhat nervously. He, too, seemed different, more forced, somehow. But his voice was as flippant as usual when he said, "You really look wonderful, my dear."

Cathy handed him her empty cup, and he put it away.

"And," he said happily, "I've hung you in a place of honor." She followed his pointing finger to her portrait above her bureau. It was a lovely likeness.

"Yes." Cathy said very grimly. "Very touching." She had steeled herself for this meeting. She knew what Steed would try to do, she knew her feelings for him when she wasn't minutes away from a horrible nightmare, and she knew that she would not be swayed.

"I told you a couple of days' complete relaxation would work wonders." Steed said cheerfully. "How are the burns, by the way?"

"Only superficial."

"Good. I'm delighted to hear it, 'cause....." Cathy watched him cross the room and opened a cabinet door. He removed a small, flat white box and handed it to her. "I've got something for you. To replace the wardrobe you lost in the - er - the line of fire."

"Ah, that's nice." She opened the box, and took out the two pieces of a bathing suit. Of

course, she thought to herself. "Who told you?" she said resignedly.

"Told me what?"

"That I'm taking a holiday."

"Are you?"

Ah, Steed, Steed, there's no one to match you, the way you try to sound innocent when you know that your opponent knows that you are not innocent at all...

"Yes." Is all she said. "I leave tomorrow. I'm off to the Bahamas."

Steed sat. Steed smiled. "No! What an extraordinary coincidence... As a matter of fact there's just a... "

That was it! That was Steed!

"A tiny bit of trouble out there?" Cathy said, not quite sure how to sort out the emotions she was feeling.

"That's right!" Steed said. "Nothing dangerous, of course."

Still that innocent voice.

"No, no. Of course not."

Steed said brightly, "As you're going to be out there anyway, pussy-footing along those sun-soaked shores..."

"I might as well do a little investigating?"

"That's the idea. What do you say?"

Cathy said very coldly, more coldly than she intended, "Goodbye, Steed!"

Steed blinked. For a second she could swear he was actually disconcerted, more at the tone of her voice than at what she had said. But all he said was, "Eh?"

Cathy replaced the swimsuit in the box and, holding the box, stood up. "That's what I say.



'Goodbye'."

"Oh, but that isn't asking too much...."

"Yes, it is!"

Cathy walked to the door, paused, and spoke from there. "You see, I shan't be pussy-footing along those sun-soaked beaches, I'll be *lying* on them. Thanks for the swimsuit."

She gave him a dismissing nod, and walked out of the flat quickly. She more than half expected he'd come after her, and steeled herself for the approach of footsteps, but none came.

Steed remained in his flat, standing, his face a study. Mrs. Gale was really angry with him this time. Nevertheless, she'd get over it, as she had a dozen times before.

"No pussy-footing? I must have been misinformed." he murmured... He sat down and picked up the telephone, and proceeded to dial his superior at Department S to give him the news.

The End: Quadrille

Act Two: Every Steed Needs A Knight

London, England 1965

Mrs. Emma Peel stood pressed against the huge plate glass window in her office on the top floor of the Knight Industries. Skyscrapers lined the rest of the street, towering over the miniature cars and people far below. The glass was cool and soothing against her forehead. She remembered the last time she had stood this close to the window. It had been five years ago, just a couple of days before her wedding to Peter Peel. They had stood against the window gazing out and Peter had said, "Look at that view, Emma. Doesn't it call to you? We could do it, you know. That new invention - the hang glider."



Emma had smiled at him, knowing he was completely serious. "Open the window and jump out? Swoop down on the unsuspecting populace below like gigantic pterodactyls?"

He'd laughed happily. "Yes! Yes!"

She'd drawn him away from the window with a hand around his waist. "I'd love to do it, darling. But if I opened one of these windows it would void my lease. Even with as much money as we pay for this suite of offices. We'll have to wait til our honeymoon."

"Trust you to be practical." He'd smiled and hugged her. "Never go out on a limb, that's my Emma."

She hadn't disagreed with him...Peter knew nothing of the cut-throat world of the boardroom.

It had been two weeks since she'd gotten the news. Peter was dead, killed in an accident while testing a new plane. Worse than dead. The plane had exploded and burned on impact, incinerating him. She would, literally, never see him again.

It was a long way down, Emma thought. How horrible it must be, to fall thousands of meters to be smashed into the ground, watching the ground coming up to meet you meter by meter. The seconds must seem very long. But Peter wouldn't have been thinking of that. He'd have been desperately trying to save the plane - he'd never have thought he couldn't bring it back in one piece. He would never have seen the end coming...would only have felt anger at the

end if he *had* seen....



Emma turned away from the window and walked back to her desk. She picked up the framed photograph - the only personal photograph she had of him in the office. It was her favorite picture of him. Peter with his arm around her, but both of them looking out and smiling for the camera. He had accompanied her to a business function dressed as the traditional British businessman with bowler hat and sober black business suit. She'd enjoyed the contrast so much - his devil-may-care attitude concealed behind that sober 9-5 outfit...that he'd decided to adopt the costume permanently. She looked at his face, the wisps of corn-blond hair escaping from beneath the bowler, his intense blue eyes, the lantern jaw. The mobile lips stretched into a broad smile.

Emma picked up the photograph and placed it in her briefcase. There was no hope for it. She wasn't going to be able to do any work today. She had thought she could - until she'd arrived at the office that morning and been ambushed by a phalanx of reporters who'd wanted to know how she felt to suddenly be a widow. Hadn't it been enough that they'd done the same thing at the Memorial Service that had been held for him? Did they have to come to her place of business? And would they be lurking around her apartment as well? Damned vultures. It had been with great difficulty that she'd passed through them without laying some of them out on the carpet, and her anger at their insensitivity had only faded with the sudden welling up of sadness when she'd gone into her office. She'd forgotten until this moment that Peter's presence would be felt even here.

She'd have to take another week off. "Get her head together," as the Americans said.

Emma punched a button on the intercom on her desk. "Doris, would you ask Franklin to come in here, please. And you too."

She had put Franklin, the Vice President of Knight Enterprises, in charge of running the company for the last two weeks. She told him now that he could do the job for another week, and he and Doris - her executive secretary, expressed their commiseration once more.

"Have Paul bring my car around to the West entrance, will you?" Emma asked Doris finally. "I'd like to avoid any reporters who still may be lurking down in the lobby."

"Certainly, Emma," said Doris.

After they had gone, Emma changed from the dress she had worn to casual denim slacks and white sweater, and tied a scarf over her head. No journalist looking at her would give her a second glance. She took her private elevator down to the first floor, then took the stairs to the Ground floor and out of the West Entrance of the building.

Emma stepped out into the sunlight and took a deep breath of the fresh air. So early in the morning...there was little traffic on the roads, but plenty of pedestrian traffic on the pavement. Her white Lotus Elan was waiting for her at the curb. The key was in the ignition, but it was a specially outfitted car that had secret buttons to push before one could drive off in it.

Suddenly Emma heard a shout behind her....cries of, "Hey, watch it!" and "Stop that man!"

She turned to look and saw a large, bulky man racing down the sidewalk, bowling people over. There was an ugly expression on his face and an even uglier knife in his left hand. He was going to run right past her.

Emma timed it perfectly. When he sprinted into range she reached out and grabbed his wrist, twisting it as she pivoted and straight-armed him into the side of the building. His face hit the brick wall with a sickening crunch. His knees were already buckling as she flipped him around and applied the *coup de grace*, a knee between the legs.



Emma didn't even watch as he slid all the way down to the concrete and rolled over in a fetal position. Newspaper reporters could smell a story, if they saw her they'd be all over her. She'd stopped the man and if the crowd of people around him didn't have the gumption to keep him down, it was nothing to do with her.

Very quickly Emma strode over to her Elan, climbed in, pressed the button underneath the dash that unlocked the steering and sped off down the street. She never looked back.

She turned the corner onto Dickon Street and merged into traffic. She would head out of the city limits into the country, where she could put the Elan through its paces and leave the memory of this morning far behind her.

Once she reached the rolling hills of suburbia, Emma put her foot down on the petrol. Birds keened overhead and the hills were green and yellow with new growth. She sped past the occasional car with ease.

She slowed down as she came to the little village of Uppington, went into her favorite Chinese restaurant and had lunch. It was an unusual Chinese restaurant in that it gave out fortune cookies in the American style. With a little smile Emma broke open her cookie - 'You will meet a handsome stranger.' Emma crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it away. She didn't want to meet anyone.

When she came out of the restaurant she looked casually down the street and stopped dead. A car had just turned out from the curb and out into the road - a large green Bentley being driven by a man wearing a bowler hat at a rakish angle. The set of the shoulders seemed familiar. Emma felt a cold hand grasp her chest and squeeze. It couldn't possibly be Peter! He loved ancient planes, not cars, but those shoulders... and that hat! Who else would dress like that in the bucolic village of Uppington?

There was no way to describe the sensation that welled up within her, of incredible joy and happiness held in check by a nagging doubt that it was all impossible. Emma sprinted to her car, jumped in, revved the engine and set off with a squeal of tires. Normally a championship-caliber driver, Emma ignored all rules of safety and set off like a driver at the pole position at Le Mans.

The Bentley had driven past the final stop sign that led out of the village. The driver began to accelerate. Emma glanced both ways, saw no cars and sped on through. Suddenly, without warning, the Bentley braked. With lightning quick reflexes Emma applied her own brakes, but she still hit the bumper with a resounding thump.

The driver rocked forward, then raised up to vault over the side of the Bentley, and turned and came towards her.

Chapter II



John Steed, a British intelligence agent and member of the super secret Department S, was quite pleased with the success of his plan. He had engineered the accident and his target had been very obliging.

He hopped lightly out of the Bentley and headed towards the woman, his eyes sharp for any reaction from anger to

embarrassment, hysteria to hatred. He was prepared for anything except that which he received. There had been an expression of hope on her face, expectation, as she first caught a glimpse of his features, as if she knew who he was, but as suddenly as with the twist of a knife blade the look of recognition in her eyes faded, and all light and happiness went out of her face, to be replaced with utter sorrow. It was an expression that impacted Steed more than he would have thought possible.

Immediately he changed his planned tactics. He doffed his bowler and smiled his most winning smile.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said. "That was inexcusable of me. I thought of something I'd forgotten and my foot just automatically hit the binders. Terribly stupid. I do hope you're not hurt?"

The woman took off her scarf, revealing perfectly coifed auburn hair. That terrible expression of despair had been wiped off her face as if it had never been, and she smiled at him, revealing perfect white teeth and a sense of humor.

"It wasn't entirely your fault. I was following you a bit too closely."

"You're too kind. My name's Steed by the way. John Steed."

The woman took his extended hand. "Mrs. Emma Peel."

"Oh." Steed felt a slight frisson of shock. "I read about...your husband's crash a couple of weeks ago. I'm terribly sorry."

"Thank you."

"Well," said Steed, to cover the awkward moment, "let's see what damage was done."

He stepped back to the juncture point between the two cars, where Mrs. Peel joined him. She was tall, about five foot eight, he judged, with a slender figure, but a good posture and easy movements which hinted at physical fitness.

"Thank heaven for ten-kilometer-an-hour bumpers," Mrs. Peel said with a smile. "No damage at all."

"It certainly doesn't look like it," Steed said. "Nevertheless we mustn't jump to conclusions. I'll give you my insurance information. And you must have your car seen to as quickly as

possible."

"Yes, of course. When I get back to the City."

"Are you on a long trip?"

"No, I was just out for a drive. I find it very relaxing, driving alone in the country."

"Until you run into absent-minded buffoons like me," Steed said with a smile. "Well, I won't keep you. Let me just write down my insurance information for you."

There was no point in keeping the woman, Steed decided, beautiful though she was. He had found out what he needed to know. He quickly scribbled his name, address and insurance policy number on a card and handed it to her.

Steed waited for her to start up the Elan and drive off. She flashed him a wave and a smile. Steed turned his Bentley around and headed back for London.

Chapter III

Steed and Dankworth walked down the hallway towards Station B. "The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley," Steed told Dankworth cheerfully. "It had been a nice little set-up. O'Reilly got the microfilm, as planned. We let him escape, as planned. He was supposed to go to his Contact. Instead he ran down Gloucester Drive and had the misfortune to meet up with Mrs. Emma Peel."

"Emma Peel? That name sounds familiar."

"Yes, widow of Peter Peel, the test pilot who crashed a few weeks ago. She is also the President of Knight Industries, and has made that a multi-million pound corporation. It's only natural that a woman with that much power learn to defend herself, both physically and mentally."

"Well, she wasn't defending herself though, was she? Plucked O'Reilly right off his feet as he ran past her, that's the way I heard it. Slammed him into a wall and then put the boot in."

Steed shrugged. "Well, she thought she was apprehending a criminal of some kind. And she was, of course. Unfortunately it wasn't a criminal that we wanted apprehended at *that* particular place and time. Still, we've got the microfilm back, and we do have O'Reilly. We'll just have to get the information out of him another way."

Steed opened the door to Department B and followed Dankworth into the room. Clemens looked up from his desk, his face grim. Clemens was their search expert. Dead or alive, when he went over a body he found what he was looking for.

"Well, Clemens, what's wrong?" demanded Steed.

"O'Reilly didn't have the microfilm on him."

"What do you mean? He must have done!"

"Steed, I searched that man. His clothes, his orifices, even x-rayed his stomach. The microfilm was originally in a small pack of cards, as you know. Those cards were gone. The microfilm is gone."

"But that's not possible," Steed insisted. "He was on the run from the time he got his hands on that pack of cards. Archer and Powell were some hundred yards behind him most of the time, but they would have seen him throw those cards somewhere. And I was in front of him and I certainly didn't see him do anything with them. He didn't have time."

"He must have come into contact with somebody while he was on the run. He gave that microfilm to *somebody*."

"Or somebody took it from him," John Steed said, his eyes very cold. "Excuse me, gentlemen. I have to go see a lady."

Chapter IV

Steed looked up the address of Mrs. Emma Peel in the phone book. She lived in Hampstead. He pointed his Bentley in that direction. He was not in a good mood, and cars around him had enough sense to get out of his way. He was seething. Not at Mrs. Emma Peel who had turned out to be a traitor to her country, but at himself.

He had always fancied himself a good judge of people, but of women especially. He'd witnessed her little take-out of O'Reilly. And he'd seen her run off immediately afterward, and this action had struck him as suspicious. So he'd followed her, and then arranged that little car accident at Uppington.

And she'd had him completely fooled. That expression of utter despair on her face, when she had looked at him at the very beginning. He had *not* thought that that had been the expression of a spy who thought she had been caught and was doomed to go to prison. He

had ascribed a more personal motive to it. But he'd been wrong. Clearly he'd been wrong. She had nabbed that microfilm off O'Reilly as slick as you please, thought she'd gotten away with it, and then been nobbled, and it had terrified her. And he'd let her get away!

But why would a woman like Emma Peel get involved with the Russians? He thought back to what he knew of her. He remembered, of course, the article some seven or eight years ago. Her father had died and she, Emma Knight at that time, had succeeded to the business. Much had been made of the fact that she was very young, more had been made of the fact that she was a woman. This publicity had seemed to annoy her extremely and she'd kept a low profile after that.

Her marriage to Peter Peel had made news but focus was on Peel as a dare-devil test pilot rather than on Mrs. Peel as a millionaire in her own right. And two weeks ago the news report that Peel had been killed in a crashed had merely said that the widow had been prostrated with grief. And there'd only been a blurry photograph of her.

There could be no monetary reason why she'd go over to the other side, so it must be philosophical. Something about the Russian system appealed to her. Foolish woman. Let her go into Russia and see how the common people survived - that was it - *survived* rather than lived - and perhaps she'd realize what a mistake she was making.

But it was too late for such a salutary lesson. It would be the big gray box for her, now.

Steed rolled up in front of the Highpoint apartment block and circled around until he found a parking spot. He settled his bowler securely on his head, flourished his broly and strode into the lobby of the building.

A security guard looked up at him. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm here to see Mrs. Emma Peel."

"Is she expecting you?"

"In a sense. I ran into her car today. I'd like to talk to her about it. My name's John Steed."

"Oh, I see. Well, half a mo."

He picked up a phone and dialed a number. "Mrs. Peel. Chap to see you. Says he ran into your car today." He listened for a few moments. Glanced at Steed as if comparing a description. Then, "Right. I'll send him up."

He replaced the receiver. "Stop a bit," he said as Steed headed for the lifts on the left side of the guard's desk. The guard gestured toward the other side, where there was but a single set of doors. "She's in the penthouse. That lift there, sir. Doesn't stop at any other floors."

"I see. Thank you."



The lift rose smoothly to the top floor and the doors slid open. Steed stepped out into the hallway. In front of him was a door. On the door, at head height, was a vast circle, and within it a large human eye, with fluttering eyelashes. It blinked at him, and before he had time to knock the door opened. She was wearing a shapeless gray sweater and shapeless gray plimsolls and managed to look charming in them. Her hair was tied back with a ribbon and there was a faint sheen of perspiration on her forehead.

"Mr. Steed," she said, "please come in."

Steed walked into her apartment, doffing his bowler, and looked around curiously. The place was elegantly furnished, with sofas and chairs around a central, free standing fireplace. But...the apartment was circular....could it be possible that this was a revolving room? How much lolly did it take to live in a revolving penthouse apartment?

Mrs. Peel gestured him toward a chair. Her face was open and friendly. "I didn't expect to see you. I dropped off my car at the garage this afternoon but I won't hear anything about it until tomorrow."

"I cannot tell a lie, Mrs. Peel," Steed, who remained standing, said. "I'm concerned about your car, of course, but the real reason I came up here was I was simply anxious to see you again."

Mrs. Peel smiled, but it seemed a little forced. "You flatter me, Mr. Steed. I appreciate your concern for my car, and I will call you if there's any news." And she headed toward the door.

Steed walked over to a table on which were decanter and glasses, and he poured himself a drink. Then he turned, and looked at Mrs. Peel. She was gazing at him with a raised eyebrow. She did not seem tense in any way, merely annoyed.

"It wasn't an accident, that you ran into me this morning," Steed said, sipping his whisky. His eyes closed in pleasure....it was very good whisky. "I arranged it."

"And why did you do that?" Calm...mellow voice.

"Well, I happened to be driving past your office building...at the time that that man was running past. You remember that man - the one you threw into the wall? I thought that was quite impressive."

"Oh. Him. Why should you think that was impressive?"

"Well, most women - most men, too, would have let him just run on by. He was carrying a knife, after all. How on earth did you learn how to...well, to throw him into a wall like that?"

Emma Peel shrugged. "My stepmother was Japanese, a descendant of the samurai. You've heard of the Samurai?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, there weren't a lot of female samurais but her family was one of the ...well, top ones, to put it ungrammatically. Even after Japan's defeat in World War II she kept the martial tradition alive. She was proficient in many martial arts including karate and ju-jitsu, as well as weapons like the naginata. And she found in me a willing pupil. She was an excellent teacher and I was an excellent student."

"I daresay. You certainly proved it this morning."

"Yes, well that's all by the by. I haven't listened to the news since I got home, but I doubt if it was such an important incident that it got reported."

"No," said Steed cheerfully, "it wasn't reported."

The woman was looking at him, curious and a little amused, and did not seem frightened at all. "If you're going to drink my Scotch," she said, "you might pour me a glass."

Steed poured her a generous amount and handed her the glass. She took it and then went and sat down on the arm of the couch. Ready to spring into action like a tigress, it seemed to Steed.

"All right, Mr. Steed. You witnessed my martial prowess this morning and it impressed you. Now, what is it you want?"

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about O'Reilly."

"O'Reilly? Who's he?"

"The man whom you...threw into the wall."

She raised an eyebrow. "You know his name? What are you, the police?"

Again she didn't seem afraid at all, just curious and wary, not of him as the police but of him as an escaped lunatic or something. What a marvelous actress she was.

"No, I'm not from the police."

She took a sip from her glass. "Well, I'm waiting." she said.

"While Mr. O'Reilly was running down that sidewalk, he had in his possession something of value. Immense value. Then he ran into you. After that, he no longer had that item in his possession."

"I see. But all I did was throw him into the wall. I left immediately after that, as you must have seen. But there were at least ten people running up to us at that time. What was to prevent anyone of them from having taken this...object of value?"

"No one got close to him, after you left him. A few people ran up to him, but they formed a circle and stared at him until a couple of my men arrived. No, Mrs. Peel. Only you could have taken the object from Mr. O'Reilly."

Emma Peel took another drink of whisky. "Show me some identification."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think you're a confidence man, Mr. Steed. I'm a rich woman, and you've managed to get yourself up here in my apartment with me, alone. You fancy I'll protest my innocence and tell you to search the place for this mysterious object of yours. But that will give you your opportunity to mark out various items of value which you will purloin, either now or in the future."

Emma Peel put her drink down, went to her door and held it open for him. "I'd like you to leave now."

Steed turned to pour himself another drink. "Almost you convince me, Mrs. Peel. But if you didn't take the object, who did?"

She blinked at him. She sighed and shrugged. Her forehead creased in thought for a few seconds. "All right. Let's be logical. Do you *know* he had it on him while he was running in my direction?"

"Yes. I know that for a fact. Witnesses behind him would have seen him get rid of it."

"All right. And do you *know* that there was no one who could have touched him while he was lying unconscious on the sidewalk?"

"As I said. My two men were there all the time. They would have seen."

"And they searched his body at that time?"

"No, of course not. He was brought into headquarters, put into a private room, and Clemens searched him then."

"Clemens. Clemens and who else?"

Steed stared at her. "Just Clemens...." he said slowly.

"Well, Mr. Steed, I don't know your Clemens. But I know that I do not have the object you are looking for. I therefore suggest you talk to Clemens about it."



Steed stared at her. If his judgment of women was any good – and he knew it was – then he had made a horrible mistake.

"Mrs. Peel, may I use your telephone?"

She gestured toward it like an excellent hostess. "Be my guest."

Steed dialed his superior at Department S very quickly. "One-Ten? Steed here. Urgent that you put Clemens in custody, right now."

He looked at Mrs. Peel, looking at *him* with cool amusement, and gulped down the rest of his whisky. "I'm on my way, sir." he told the phone. "I'll explain when I get there." He hung up the receiver, doffed his hat to Mrs. Peel, murmured "been a pleasure," and strode quite briskly out the door. She closed the door behind him, gently.

Chapter V

"So he's gone?" said Steed, standing in One-Ten's office.

"Yes," that worthy replied. "He must have skipped out just after he told you that O'Reilly didn't have the microfilm. He knew that once you'd questioned the woman you'd find out, sooner or later, that she had no knowledge of it, and latch onto him as the only other logical choice."

"But, what a drastic step for him to take! The microfilm O'Reilly had was important, of course, but surely not important enough for him to break cover over it! The Other Side has lost him for good, now. It wasn't worth it!"

One-Ten shrugged. "Who knows what was in Clemens' mind? Maybe he'd gotten tired of the game and seized this opportunity as a chance to end it for himself."

"Well, it's a bit of a facer, though, isn't it. Clemens being a traitor."

"Yes. We're going to have to institute some better recruiting and security arrangements in future, Steed. Weed out people like Clemens."

"I should hope so."

"Having said, that, Steed, I've lined up a new partner for you, to replace Mrs. Gale."

Steed held up a hand. "Mrs. Gale is on holiday. She doesn't need to be replaced."

"Are you *sure* of that, Steed?"

Steed shrugged. "Besides, who would this replacement be? One of the old guard, who went through the same screening as Clemens?"

"Maybe," said One-Ten sourly.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I prefer to recruit my own partner. From outside the ranks."

"What? Another one of your talented amateurs?"

"At least I know I can trust them, sir."

One-Ten's face flushed. "That's a terrible thing to say about the British security service, Steed!"

"Yes, sir. Indeed it is, sir."

One-Ten glared at him, sensing something ironic in Steed's comment. But he chose to let it lie.

"All right, Steed. Go get your talented amateur. God knows England needs her."

Steed nodded and left, saying only under his breath, "So do I, sir. So do I."

End: Every Steed Needs a Knight

Act Three: The Murder Market, or The Transformed Man

1. Before

Frozen bars of sunlight drilled into Cathy's Gale's bedroom through the slats of her window shade and shattered against the floor, spreading light but no warmth throughout the room. Cathy opened her eyes and looked around briefly. But she didn't like the feeling of coolness on the tip of her nose. "Ah, to be in England again," she murmured, ironically, for she had just returned from a two week vacation in the tropical sunshine of the Bahamas. She pulled the covers over her head and prepared to go back to sleep.

Chirp, chirp went the phone by her bed. Cathy extended a hand, found the receiver, and brought it under the covers.

"Mrs. Gale?"

It was a familiar voice. "Hello, Steed," Cathy Gale said in resignation.

"I didn't wake you up, did I? I'm dying to hear about your holiday. Won't you come over?"

"Do you know what time it is?" asked Cathy.

"Time for you to stop being a layabout. You're back from your holiday, my dear. You can't hang on to the lazy latitudes here."

"That's Hawaii," she pointed out, sitting up so the covers slid down her nightgown-clad form. "I was in Bermuda." But she sighed. "I'll be there in a few minutes, Steed." She hung up without listening to Steed's reply, if any. Just at that second the cuckoo, which inhabited the Black Forest clock that hung on the wall between two windows, flipped open the doors of its hidey hole and popped out. Cuckoo, it went. Cuckoo. Seven times. Cathy Gale glared at it. "Be quiet, you."

She showered quickly, put on a woolen dress in her favorite green, and then wrapped herself in her fur coat as she left her flat. She bypassed her Triumph motorcycle for her car, and drove slowly to Steed's flat. As she drove, she thought. She'd had quite a bit of mail waiting for her when she'd returned from her trip to the Bahamas. There had been offers in some of those letters, from some esteemed colleagues in her various fields of expertise. And they had been extremely tempting offers. And yet she was driving at seven o'clock in the morning to visit John Steed, who undoubtedly had a job of his own to give her.

She walked into Steed's flat without knocking. He stood in the middle of the room, slender in a black turtleneck sweater, holding a pencil and a straight-edge in his hands. "Good morning, Mrs. Gale," Steed said cheerfully.



Steed's exuberance always seemed to be catching. "Good morning," she returned with a smile.

"Help yourself to coffee."

"Always the perfect host," Cathy said, and poured herself a cup. Steed was working on a large sheet of paper propped against a revolving drafting board. Cathy drifted over to it curiously. The page contained several sets of peaked lines. "Planning?" asked Cathy. "Plotting," returned Steed.

"For your accountant? A museum of modern art? Or," and her finger traced the final downward line, "your popularity poll?"

Steed ignored the dig. "Looking into a rather curious situation. Eleven murders in six months. No clues, no apparent motives. no suspects. Or rather, the people who did have a motive happened to be conveniently elsewhere at the time."

"Coincidence?"

"This says no," said Steed, indicating his plot. "Everything points to eleven organized murders. The chances of coincidence are in the region of..." Steed made play with his slide rule. Cathy thought about it for a few seconds. "27 million to one. It's a generality. You can have an exact figure, if you like."

"No, to the nearest million will do," retorted Steed, dropping his slide rule unceremoniously on the table

"Unfortunately," said Cathy musingly, "mathematics won't tell you who did the murders."

"I'm hoping these might," Steed commented, returning to her side with a sheaf of photographs. "By some strange quirk of fate all the victims had their photographs taken recently."

"All at the same studio." commented Cathy, sorting through them.

Steed selected one. "Number Eleven. Jonathan Stone." Then he glanced at her sideways. Cathy knew that look. He wanted her to do something for him, but he wouldn't just come out and say it. "Don't you think it'd be a good idea if we paid our condolences to his widow?"

"We? I don't know her." Cathy responded, sipping her coffee.

"Surely one of us ought to go." Steed continued in his persuasive voice.

"But of course, you can't," Cathy stated, with amused annoyance. Not at what he wanted her to do, but how he went about asking her. It must be a congenital defect, she thought. He did it every...single...time.

But, "Must dash," Steed told her cheerfully. "I'm having my photograph taken." And he trotted up the stairs and out of the flat. Cathy finished her coffee in a leisurely manner, and then followed him. On the drive to Mrs. Stone's house (Steed had neglected to provide her with the address but she'd looked it up in the phone book) she concocted her cover story.

A butler greeted Cathy Gale at the door. He took her card, disappeared for a few seconds, then returned to show her into the living room. Cathy glanced around. Whatever Mr. Stone's business had been, he certainly had done himself well. She picked up a photograph, and was holding it when the widow entered the room.

"Mrs. Gale?"

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you at a time like this," said Cathy with genuine sympathy, "but I'm with the *Industrial Times* magazine." Cathy looked at her hostess closely without appearing to do so. There were little signs of grieving - no redness about the eyes to indicate crying, but she did seem a bit tense, and Cathy herself knew that people showed grief for the loss of their loved ones in different ways.

"Oh, yes, do sit down."

"Thank you. Since your husband was so prominent in the business world I'm writing a biography."

"Oh, what do you want to know?"

It was a man's voice. Cathy turned. A tall, well-dressed in a dark suit, wearing a mourning band had entered the room.

"Oh, this is my brother-in-law, Robert Stone."

Cathy nodded her head to him, then turned back to the widow. "Well, I need some background details."

"That's simple enough." said Robert Stone.

"And I'd like a recent photograph."

Mrs. Stone furrowed her brow. "Well, I really don't think..."

"No problem." interrupted Robert. "I saw some in his desk only last week."

Mrs. Stone looked at her brother-in-law, with an expression on her face that Cathy couldn't quite interpret. She said quickly, "I'm sure you're wrong, Robert."

"Well, give me the keys and I'll take a look."

Mrs. Stone darted a glance at Cathy. "No, no, it's, it's quite alright. I'll go." She hurried from the room.

"Tragic business," Robert Stone commented, moving further into the room.

"Yes." Cathy rose. "Strange that he should be killed without reason. I mean, his business interests were quite ordinary, weren't they?"

At this point. Mrs. Stone returned. "I'm sorry. You must have been mistaken, Robert. I can't find any photographs."

Cathy looked at Robert Stone's face. His expression, too, was undecipherable.

Cathy returned to Steed's flat to report. The incident about the photographs puzzled her. "I think she was lying, but why?"

As she spoke Steed busied himself with a phonebook. He looked up at this point to say, "What about the brother?"

"Educated. Sophisticated. Charming." She paused. "Rather good looking." She felt Steed glance at her. It was a game they played, this flirting. Steed liked to believe he was irresistible to women, and to most women he undoubtedly was. But he'd never been able to

get round her, though it was not for lack of trying. Yet he liked the fact that she egged him on sometimes, by recounting her conquests, her interests. A sparring match, of a kind.

"Where's the catch?" he asked now.

"He was edgy..tense."

"Something to hide?"

"If so he kept it hidden." Cathy put down the pencil that she'd been using to tap against her teeth. "Have a good time at the photographers?"

"Went like a flash." Steed must have finally found what he was looking for in the phone book. "Ah, Togetherness." He took up a pad of paper and began to write. "My dear, you must be famished. There's a charming little restaurant where they do the most beautiful escargot *aubuerge a creme*."

"With *ausperege*." Cathy added, her tastebuds watering already.

"Parmesan. Touch of garlic. And the *crepe* are superb."

"Ah, I can see I'm in for a feast."

"Delightful place. Just a stone's throw from the library."

Cathy's smile faded. As usual. "Mm hm. The library."

"After lunch you just browse through the police records on all the murders. Arm yourself with a multitude of facts."

"And in particular?"

"Were the victims married?"

"What's marriage got to do with it?"

Steed seated himself beside her on the divan. "A maaa-rvelous institution. I'm seriously contemplating it. I'll put myself on the market today." he turned and looked at her closely. "Every bid considered. Of course I'm very choosy." And then he was up and out the door again.

Cathy laughed.

It was so like Steed, she thought on her drive to lunch. For two years he'd played these little games with her...these game of manipulating her into doing something rather than simply asking her to do it - seemingly taken pleasure in it. And she'd snapped at him and argued with him about it...all to no avail. Well, but why should he modify his behavior, really, when despite all her complaints of the way he treated her she still responded to his calls for assistance?

Cathy's fingers were black with newsprint by the time she'd finished researching the murders, tabulating all known facts neatly in her notebook. That done, she returned to her flat. Then she went for a spin on her motorcycle, returning just in time for dinner. It was a solitary meal, which she enjoyed, curled up in front of her television set watching the news on the BBC.

The phone rang. It was Steed. "Mrs. Gale? Don't talk. Listen." Cathy gritted her teeth.

"Go at once to 14 Spurley Ct. It's just round the corner from you. A man called Henshaw."

"But why..."

"I can't explain now." he said impatiently.

"But what.."

"Don't argue..." His voice lowered. "Unexpected visitors," he suddenly hissed. "Goodbye." Cathy glared at the silent phone in her hand.

Another game with her? Cathy thought, as she pulled on flat shoes and wrapped herself in her fur coat. Who was this Henshaw? Was she supposed to interrogate him? Or was he in some kind of danger? Damn Steed and his need-to-know philosophy! His voice had certainly sounded urgent, though. And that bit about 'unexpected visitors.' Yes, Henshaw was probably in danger. She'd better hurry.

Cathy pulled up in front of the block of flats known as Spurley Court. She entered and took the lift up to the fourteenth floor. What a posh place. She entered the luxuriously appointed hallway and knocked on the door. No answer. Mrs. Gale looked around...then she tried the door. It opened to her touch.

Cathy eased into the flat, calling, "Mr. Henshaw? The light was dim - it came only from

candles. The dining table was laid with chafing dishes. Cathy went further in, picked up one of the candle holders. From somewhere...she could hear water running. She turned towards the sound, as she did so some sixth sense made her turn back.

A woman, dressed in evening clothes, had flitted past her - in one hand carrying a pair of high-heeled shoes. She did not do anything foolish like hesitate in the door and turn back so that Cathy could get a look at her. A pro.

Cathy paused only to set down the candles. It would have been quicker to just drop the thing but then of course she'd probably set the whole place on fire. Only a couple of seconds lost.

She raced after the woman - out into the hallway. Here the woman did look back, just as she disappeared into the emergency stairwell. She slammed the door closed. Cathy jerked it open and tripped headlong over a roller skate left on the landing. She fought to regain her balance and her breath, and by the time she had done so the woman was long gone. A pro indeed, Cathy thought. Had her escape route all planned out just in case she needed it. Why had she needed it? Cathy returned to the flat, entered the bathroom, and saw a man in evening attire stretched out in the full bathtub. Quite, quite dead.

Part II

Cathy entered Steed's flat. He looked at her, and from the expression on his face she knew that he knew that Henshaw was dead. He gave a kind of grimace, said, "Henshaw," and knocked over one of the soldiers on his miniature battlefield. This enraged Cathy.



"You knew, didn't you?" she stormed, knocking over a couple more of those little toy soldiers who fought, suffered and died under the unfeeling hand that controlled them. "You knew he was dead when you sent me there!"

"Of course I didn't!" Steed snapped at her. "Well, not soon enough! As soon as I found out he was in danger I sent you around."

"Not soon enough!" Cathy snapped back. She turned away from Steed in frustration and sat down. "Well, I didn't do much better. I let the murderer walk right past me."

"You saw him?"

"Her. Young. Very pretty."

Steed's eyes narrowed. "I wonder if she's looking for a husband. The Marriage Bureau is involved in this. It's involved right up to its bridal bouquet."

Steed strode round the couch to the drinks bar and began mixing. He snapped his fingers at her. Another one of his very annoying habits. "Your report on those other cases. All the victims were bachelors."

"All except Jonathan Stone."

"Yes, that's a bit of a poser." He presented her with a drink, which she accepted with a nod of thanks. "All the same we may find out tomorrow. They should have found me a suitable partner by then."



To her querying look he explained, "The marriage bureau. Very scientific. They analyze you personality and then find you a compatible companion."

"That must have set them a problem." Cathy commented sardonically.

"Eh?"

"Finding a match for you."

"Oh, I don't know. Educated, charming, cultured..."

Cathy didn't give him the additional word she knew he wanted, but instead added "Ruthless, devious, scheming - she'll have to be quite a girl. A cross between Lucrezia Borgia and Joan of Arc."

"Sounds like every girl I ever knew," Steed said somewhat coolly. "By the way, my dear," he grinned at her, "Isn't it high time you thought of marrying again?"

Cathy choked on her scotch.

The next morning – as ordered– Cathy thought grimly, she presented herself at the Togetherness Marriage Bureau. She was at her most feminine, and had taken especial care with her makeup. After all, she was after a husband, wasn't she? The cloying sweetness of

the anteroom almost sent her into gales of hysterical laughter, but she managed to control herself, and she was just signing in to the register when Steed walked out of another room followed by another man who was obviously the head of the organization.

"Goodbye and good luck," the elder man told Steed.



Mrs. Gale handed him the pen which she had used, and they exchanged glances. Then Steed turned and blew a kiss at the beautiful blonde receptionist. Cathy had to clench her lips tightly together. What was he trying to do, make her corpse in front of everyone?

"And what can Togetherness do for you, miss..." said the man who had followed Steed into the room. He was rather short, with thinnish, graying hair, well-groomed, with the modulated voice of an actor. And he had taken one look at her and his eyes had lit up.

"Mrs." said Cathy. "Mrs. Cathy Gale. I'm looking for a husband."

Well, you've come to the right place. Indeed you have. Will you kindly step into my office?"

"Mr. Lovejoy!" cried the blonde receptionist.

"Not now, not now. I'm busy."

"It's the managing director. Urgent!"

Lovejoy stopped short, took her arm and turned Mrs. Gale around. She didn't try to resist. Lovejoy spoke rapidly. "Well, there's really nothing we can do without photographs. Full length, full face, head and shoulders. We recommend the photographer at this address." He handed her a card.

"But I really only came..."

"He'll fix you up," Lovejoy told her, urging her toward the door. "Just tell him it's for us." Cathy found herself in the hallway. Suddenly Lovejoy opened the door again, "Good day, and hurry back with those photographs."

Cathy smiled as she walked away. Seemed like she had made a conquest. Well, well, she thought. The Managing Director. She wondered if Steed had hit a nerve somewhere in the organization.

Cathy arrived at the photographer's. He had lots and lots of lovely equipment which she would have just loved to look over, but she merely handed him Lovejoy's card. He set to work on her right away. "I'm rather anxious to get them," she told Beal at the conclusion of the sitting. "Fine," said the man. "I'll develop them right away. If you'll come back in half an hour?"

"Lovely."

Thirty minutes later Mrs. Gale returned, after having spent an enjoyable time at an antiques shop just around the corner. Beal popped out of an inner door. "There we are, Mrs. Gale."

"Oh, my pictures, thank you."

Not pictures!" protested the young, very full-of-himself photographer. "I don't take pictures! I capture the very essence of your personality. The essential you."

"Will a check be all right?" was all Cathy said. He nodded assent. He continued to hover near her, eyeing her with what he apparently presumed would look like a connoisseur's eye.

"If Togetherness get many more clients like you, I might give it a whirl meself." Cathy restrained a suitable retort, as at that second a man entered the studio and called, "Mr. Beal."

Beal excused himself and went over to the visitor. Cathy glanced back casually, and her eyes narrowed in surprise. It was Robert Stone. She turned away.

II.

Once more in Lovejoy's office, Cathy smiled charmingly at him. He smiled back at her.

"Togetherness will solve all your problems, Mrs. Gale."

"I only have one, Mr. Lovejoy. Finding a suitable partner." Cathy spoke in a slightly higher register than her normal voice, and kept a smile on her lips at all times.

"We'll do our best. Now, what are your requirements?" Lovejoy poked up a pencil. "Age group? Physical aspect? Just let me know what you want. "

Cathy thought for a moment. "Well, he would have to be mature. A man of culture and intelligence."

She watched Lovejoy write this down. She couldn't resist. "With stamina."

Lovejoy's pencil froze for a palpable number of seconds. "Quite so, yes. Of course, our Togetherness Counselor will take care of the fine details. Many of our clients are quite pernicky. Some even specify a title."

Cathy smiled sweetly. "I'm far more interested in the man, really."

"Now, financial status. You would wish your opposite half to be reasonably wealthy? A rhetorical question, really. An exclusive concern such as this, we do not accept, you understand the lower orders."



"Naturally."

Lovejoy smiled and rose to his feet. "I can see we understand each other perfectly, Mrs. Gale. Now, if I might recapitulate. Mature, cultured, intelligent....with stamina, of independent means. Will that be all?"

"I think that will be entirely satisfactory, Mr Lovejoy." Cathy rose, and handed Lovejoy the packet of photographs. "The photographer asked me

to give you these."

"Ah, yes. Yes," Lovejoy slipped out the sheets of paper and sorted through them. "Excellent. I can see we shall have no delay in placing you at all, Mrs. Gale."

Lovejoy escorted her to the door of her office. Cathy exited the anteroom, nodding to the beautiful blonde receptionist and the tall doorman, and not at all noticing a woman with her face buried in a magazine.

Once more at Steed's apartment. I spend more time here than at my own, Cathy thought ruefully. But it wasn't a total waste - they were practicing their golf.

Steed was puttering around in one of his rooms, probably looking for a trick ball, Cathy

surmised. Cathy herself put a golf ball on the floor, sighted a small target on the opposite side of the room, and hit the ball softly. It missed by a few inches.

"How did your Togetherness get-together go?" called Cathy. "Your blind date? What was she like?"

"Extremely charming and very attractive," Steed commented, coming into the larger room with a couple of lengths of pipe, which he proceeded to place in strategic places around the room.



Cathy relinquished the golf club to him. "I suppose you realize she may be deadly serious about all this."

"With the accent on the deadly." Steed agreed, addressing the golf ball.

"She was very careful but she was obviously planted to find out my more personal financial problems." He swiped, the ball rose in the air, missed the pipe he was aiming for and bounced off the wall and out a window. He handed the club back to Cathy, who took it while

saying, "Oh, that doesn't necessarily follow. I mean, if she is genuine, she'd naturally want to know all those sort of details."

"She showed an inordinate interest in my cousin."

"Cousin?"

"The rich one. The one who stands between me and the family fortune. The one I invented as bait."

"And she bit?" Cathy said with a smile.

"Hook, line and sinker." He smirked a bit. "She took to me, too."

Cathy sighted her next target, and hit the ball. It missed the pipe and went through an open window.

"How did you get on with old blink-eye Lovejoy?" asked Steed.

Cathy attempted an impersonation, as she watched Steed get up on his coffee table and balance the golf ball on a small paper box. "I must say, Mrs. Gale, we should have no difficulty in placing you at all." Steed hit the ball and Cathy ducked out of the way of the cardboard box.

"Very good for the ego, isn't it." Steed said cheerily. "Makes one feel that the whole platoon of the other half panting to get up one."

He went to retrieve his golf ball.

"I also went to the photographer's." Cathy commented.

"Friend Beal? How did you get on there?"

"Robert Stone was there."

Steed came back into the room eagerly. "Robert Stone! What did he want?"

"He was talking to Beal."

"What about?" Steed said impatiently.

Cathy shrugged. "I couldn't hear. I was too far away."

"A great pity." Steed sighed pityingly. Then, as usual, he cheered up immediately. "Now, wedding cake decorations. A great big silver horseshoe? Miniature bride and groom? I've been invited to old Lovejoy's for a wedding cake tasting."

III.

That evening, Cathy returned from a date of her own -- with an archeologist friend, a friend of many years, who followed that old line of Agatha Christie's -- the older she got, the more interested in her he was. They had kissed briefly at the door, but Cathy was tired and didn't invite him in. Once inside, she saw the red light blinking on her answer phone and pressed the button. Steed's voice was jubilant: "Mrs. Gale! Great news! Please stop by my flat for some champagne!"

Cathy switched off the tape with a slight feeling of triumph. So, Steed was close to cracking the case. It would be a pleasure to put these people behind bars - using the ...well, not the sacred precincts of marriage, obviously, but the prospect of providing happiness to lure

unsuspecting people to their deaths...very unpleasant people. Tired she might be, but this was worth a trip to Steed's flat that night.

She knocked, walked into Steed's flat, and flinched at the sound of a shot. Then laughed at herself. Steed had just popped the cork on the champagne. And badly, too, foam was slurping over the edge as he came forward to pour it into waiting glasses.

"Whoops!" Steed laughed. "Glad you could make it."

"Why the sudden celebration? The champagne?"

"It's a sort of farewell gesture."

"Leaving?"

"No, more of an assignment."

"An assignment?" Cathy smiled. "Or an assignation?" She sipped the champagne appreciatively.

"Like it?"

"Mm."

"Gift from my new employers. For services about to be rendered."

"Lovejoy and Dinsford." Cathy acknowledged.

"The very same. They even provided me with the means." He picked up a wicked pistol, equipped with a silencer, and waved it at her.

"Good." said Cathy with satisfaction, seating herself on his divan. "Then we've got them."

"*Them.*" Steed agreed. "Now I've got to find out who's behind Togetherness." His voice changed slightly, became grimmer. "And I can't do that until I've done the assignment."

Cathy stared at him. "What are you supposed to do?"

Steed smiled. "I've got to murder somebody."

"Someone in particular or can you choose at random?"

"No, the choice has already been made. They even provided a photograph of the victim. I must say it's rather flattering." He picked up a photo and looked at it.

Cathy Gale had a sudden premonition, and she didn't like it. She also didn't like the way Steed was acting. He never waved a gun about like that. And he'd been antic...moving all



about the room. "Steed," Cathy said very quietly, "Who are you supposed to kill?" Don't do it, Steed, she pleaded silently, don't do it.

But he did it. He leveled the gun at her and said grimly, "You, my dear."

Cathy Gale rose from the divan like the wrath of a Goddess, her head thrown back like Queen Boadicea leading her soldiers against the Roman legions. "How dare you! How dare you!" She strode up to Steed and grabbed the gun out of his hand and threw it down to the floor violently. Steed gaped at her.

"Just a joke, my dear," he said feebly.

"A stupid joke! A ridiculous joke. A sadistic joke. And that's what I *hate* about you, Steed. You are a *sadist*."

"Oh, steady on." Steed was starting to get angry, but Cathy overrode him. "I've put up with it for two years. Your manipulating. Your lying. These stupid games you play to make me do what you want me to do."

"But that's all they were, Mrs. Gale. Games...I thought you enjoyed them as much as I - you *knew* I was playing them."

Cathy took a deep breath. "Touche, Steed. But not through the heart. You enjoy the game too much, and I have had enough of it. This is it. I'm through."

"Look, Mrs. Gale. I'm sorry, okay? I abase myself. You're just overwrought." He put his hand on her arm. She looked at him and he removed his hand hurriedly.

"This is it, Steed," Cathy said again. "Pointing a gun at me like that. In the first place you



NEVER point a gun, loaded or unloaded, at anyone, right? In the second place - what did that just do to the trust between us? Part of me actually thought you cared enough about this assignment to actually murder me in order to accomplish your goal!"

"Mrs. Gale!"

"Well...it was just a small part, Steed. But, no, this is it. I'll finish this assignment - presumably in a coffin. But then I'm done. I'm going back to my own life."

Steed looked at her and started to say something, then stopped. He shrugged. "As you say, Mrs. Gale. Here, let me refill your champagne."

"So why me?" Cathy said, calmly, as she sat down. Steed, a little white faced, attempted to regain his former insouciance. But he felt as if he'd been hit in the pit of the stomach. It had just been a joke!



"They didn't explain why. Just said I was to do you in."

"Hmmm," Cathy said thoughtfully. "I wonder if my photograph fell into the hands of someone who recognized it. Henshaw's killer, for example."

Steed nodded. "That's a distinct possibility."

II.

Hours later, Cathy Gale lay in her coffin, only her face visible, the rest of her white-gowned form hidden by satin batting, specially designed to conceal the fact that she was still breathing. Candles in huge candle holders guarded her on four sides. Cathy was meditating, and so deep in thought was she that she barely heard the voices of the two men who entered the viewing room.

"She looks peaceful." commented John Steed.

"Yes." The voice was Lovejoy's. Lovejoy, who had been so taken with her...pleased now that she was dead.

"Let's hope that her past sins - there were many, from what I gather, will be overlooked and that she will..." Steed raised his eyes skyward.

"We must hope so."

"Sincerely," said Steed sincerely.

"Most sincerely. I take it there was no..."

Steed grinned his hard grin. "She didn't feel a thing."

"My trust in you has not been misplaced, Mr. Steed."

"I hope not."

"On the contrary. In fact, I won't hesitate to put it to the test again."

Excellent, thought Mrs. Gale behind closed eyes. Steed's plan was working. As it jolly well ought to do!

"Again?" said Steed, innocently.

"I'll be quite frank with you, Mr. Steed. A man of your caliber is worth ten of those we usually work with. We could use you again many times and it would be profitable work. Besides, I think I know my man. I sense a certain restlessness. Life needs a dash of flavor for you. A little danger, eh?"

Lovejoy certainly knew Steed well, thought Cathy.

"I must say I'm tempted."

"Capital. Then perhaps..."

"But I should like to see your Managing Director. You do have a Managing Director, don't you?"

There was a pause. But then Lovejoy said, "Naturally."

"Time I started working from the top then."

"We'll see, Mr. Steed. We'll see. Can I offer you a lift anywhere?"

"No thanks, I think I'll stay awhile. Pay my last respects, eh?"

Cathy strained her ears as she heard footsteps, then a door close. Then came Steed's voice: "You've got a spider on your nose."

Cathy opened her eyes and sat up. "Have you no respect?"

"You were certainly resting very peacefully." Steed said cheerfully. "I thought you were asleep. Now, are you comfortable?"

"Not very. How much longer am I supposed to lie in state?"

"I should take it easy until this evening. I'll come and take you out then."

"All day." Cathy said, disgruntled.

"It will be a nice rest for you. Besides, it will give me time to find out who Mr. X is."

"Robert Stone?" Cathy suggested.

"Perhaps. But we mustn't let them see you until we're absolutely certain. Now, anything I can get you? Magazines? Newspapers?"

"I brought some books with me."

"Oh, where are they?"

"I'm lying on them. That's why I'm not very comfortable."

"Well, perhaps this will ease the aches and pains of those sharp corners." Steed delved into the other end of the coffin and brought up a bottle of champagne and a wine glass.

Cathy grinned. "Now I call that very thoughtful."

"You see? I *can* be thoughtful, Mrs. Gale."

"When you think about it," said Cathy.

"Don't get tipsy.' Steed told her. "We can't have you hiccupping in the coffin," and he smiled as he left.

Cathy smiled too. If she hadn't already decided to end her partnership with Steed that horrible pun would have sealed the deal.

Hours passed, and as the minutes crawled by with no activity Cathy began to get very bored. Lovejoy had already seen her dead, why should she remain? But Steed was nothing if not thorough.

Cathy leapt lithely out of the coffin, poured herself a glass of champagne, and began to do stretching exercises. She would practice her fencing footwork as long as she had the time. Suddenly she heard footsteps and voices. Cathy gulped down the champagne, tossed the glass into the coffin and hurriedly climbed in herself. She pulled the satin batting up to her neck just in time.

Silence. Footsteps. Four men. Suddenly, darkness. Cathy opened her eyes to slits which widened as the coffin lid descended on her. Well, well. Steed had been right.

Carefully, but very very quickly Cathy reached below her and pressed a button. The back of the coffin dropped down, plunging her into the hollowed out trestle beneath. With just the slightest of nudges the spring-bottom snapped into place, and an empty coffin was carried out of the room. Cathy waited a good long time before she levered herself out of the trestle, and poured herself another glass of champagne. She felt she deserved it.

Cathy Gale, dressed in her action leather, stood in the darkness of the inner sanctum of the Togetherness Bureau. She had heard a noise outside. She waited, silently, as a man entered the room - leaving the door open. Very careless of him. He started searching the place, making a lot of noise. An amateur, Cathy thought. She flicked on a light and he spun around. It was Robert Stone.

"You! I saw you buried!"

Cathy held her gun on him "Correction, Mr. Stone. You saw my coffin buried. Not me. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Disappoint?" He stared at her blankly.

"A nice organization you have here."

"I have? Now wait a minute! You've got your wires crossed."

"I saw you at the photographer's."

"So, you...you imagined it was me. Now look, I went to that photographer for one reason only. The same reason I broke in here tonight. To find out who killed my brother. Look, you've got to believe me! I've snooped and I've pried and I've discovered that Jonathan was supposed to meet someone from here the day he was murdered. I thought they must keep records of meetings between clients."

Cathy believed him. She nodded. "You try the desk."

She herself walked over to the filing cabinet. She put her gun down on the top as she began opening drawers.

"I still don't understand." Robert Stone said. "The coffin!"

"Steed thinks ahead." Cathy shrugged. "I'll give him that. Lead floor to the coffin to give it weight. Hinged bottom in case I needed it. And I needed it."

"Ah, here." said Robert Stone, holding up a file. Cathy turned and took a step away from the filing cabinets. At that exact instant a woman came into the room, carrying a gun of her own. Cathy recognized her as the woman who had ran out of Henshaw's apartment. Barbara Wakefield, she thought - as Steed's description of his date had matched her. And her gun half a room away. "Damn," thought Cathy Gale. "And I dismissed Stone as an amateur. Thank God I'm retiring now."

Barbara Wakefield's face was cold, the gun in her hand steady. She spoke in a grating Canadian accent: "Back up This means we'll have to have your funeral all over again. Still I'm sure a double funeral will be much cheaper."

Lovejoy's voice called from the outer office. "Barbara."

"In here."

Lovejoy, Dinsford, the tall doorman....and Jessica Stone, widow of Jonathan Stone, entered the room.



"Jessica!" cried her brother-in-law in shock.

"Steed!" exclaimed Dinsford as the full import of seeing Catherine Gale arrive sank in. "We were right about Steed."

"Fools, both of you." snapped Jessica Stone.

"He went back to his flat." Lovejoy gritted.

"We can catch him there if we hurry..." agreed Dinsford.

"Later." snapped Jessica Stone. "We'll tend to Steed later. First thing is to take care of these two. Dinsford, back the car up to the front entrance. They'll have to be found pretty far from here."

Cathy watched Dinsford walk out. Good. That lowered the odds to four to two.

"Why, Jessica?" demanded her brother in law. "Why..."

"Kill Jonathan? Kill my own husband?" Jessica Stone spoke bitterly. "He wasn't content. We had a good organization here. Infallible. But he wasn't content. No, he had to get involved with one girl after another. And so I used the organization - our organization—against him."

"The only married man." Cathy said aloud.

"Oh, you've noticed that?" Jessica Stone said sarcastically. "Very clever. Very astute. But it won't do you much good now. Dinsford should be ready by now."

Lovejoy came forward, grabbed Cathy somewhat roughly by the arm and led her to the door. Good. Too cramped in here for fighting, Cathy thought. Much better out in the anteroom. More room to swing a cat - or a mink-clad murderess.

The little procession entered the anteroom. Cathy saw immediately that Walter Dinsford lay unconscious on a loveseat. So....Steed was here. Cathy began to breathe a little easier.

"Don't just sit there, Dinsford." snapped Lovejoy, putting a hand on the man's shoulder. Then, "Walter," he cried, as he realized Dinsford was unconscious. At that precise second the groom-mannequin came off his pedestal and punched Lovejoy in the mouth. Robert Stone, realizing that help was at hand, immediately got in on the action.

"Mrs. Stone!" Steed called to Cathy. Cathy nodded and sprinted into the office, where Barbara Wakefield and Jessica Stone were busy burning files in a rubbish bin. Cathy punched Jessica Stone in the face, and upended the unburned files out onto the floor.

Barbara Wakefield had given her gun to Lovejoy. She now grabbed up letter opener. The two women faced each other. Cathy did not underestimate her opponent - the woman was a cold-blooded killer. And she had the poise and the lightness of foot that indicated some familiarity with the martial arts.

The two women circled. Cathy could hear the sounds of fighting from the other room. Steed might have trouble with the giant doorman, but the other two, not a problem. So he'd have that well in hand. She concentrated on her own adversary. Damn these chair and things!

Barbara lunged forward, swiping with the letter opener. Cathy danced backwards, and felt a cushion behind her knees. Deliberately she fell backward, hoping to entice the woman to come to her and leave herself open for a kick to the heart, but Barbara just sneered at the ploy and waited for her. Cathy regained her feet, Barbara attacked, and Cathy took her in a judo throw and sent her sailing across the furniture.

Barbara popped to her feet, face red with rage, and flung herself at Cathy. Cathy karate chopped her as she went by, and she landed unconscious in the arms of John Steed, who had just entered the room.



"Perfect timing, Steed."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it."

He looked up at Mrs. Gale. "Another case solved."

"And my final case, Steed. I'm going home."

He stared at her for a long time, then shrugged. "Okay."

Cathy nodded. "Okay." She sketched him a salute and left the room, walking out of the anteroom past all of the unconscious bodies, past a silent Stone who watched her go in puzzlement.

John Steed stood for a long time with the body of Barbara Wakefield in his arms. The warm body of a very cold woman. And he thought of the other woman who was walking out of his life. Had he driven her out. He...sadistic? Steed turned and placed the body of Barbara Wakefield, very carefully, on a couch. He raised her head and placed a pillow beneath it. He then went out, told Robert Stone to call the police, informing him that all the proof of the murder ring was in the office. Then, very quietly, Steed climbed into his Bentley and drove home.

Act Four: Every Knight Needs A Steed

Chapter I

The Templehof Airport in Gatow, British Sector, Berlin, was extremely small and crowded, and getting through it was time-consuming at the best of times, but Emma Peel liked airports and had worn comfortable shoes. As she waited in queues, first for her luggage and then for officials to check her passport, she quite frankly people-watched.

"And why have you come to Berlin, Mrs. Peel?" asked the official thumbing through her passport.

"I want to see Duke Ellington," she informed him cheerfully.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The American jazz musician and his orchestra is having a series of concerts here. In Berlin, that is to say. American sector. It will be a historic performance."

The official nodded. "I see," he said, though Emma was willing to wager that he didn't. He gestured at her suitcase and she opened it for him. Prominent on top was a large black metallic item in the shape of an upside down heart. He looked at this with one raised eyebrow. But there was no one so used to British eccentricity as British officials. He merely gestured her to close her suitcase, stamped her passport with a flourish and handed it back to her. "Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you. I'm sure I shall."

Templehof Airport had a small café, and although Emma wasn't particularly hungry one must always sample the cuisine at airports. It was part of the travel experience. She ordered a wiener schnitzel and it was surprisingly good.

Outside the airport, Emma flagged down a taxi. "Hotel Britannia, please." she told the driver. He nodded cheerily, popped out of his cab to stow her suitcase away in the boot, and then drove her there with efficiency. This was Emma's first time in Berlin but she had studied a map of the various places she wanted to go, and she knew he was taking the most efficient route. She tipped him properly, then followed the doorman who carried her suitcase into the Hotel Britannia.

As she walked up to reception, Emma passed a placard prominently displayed: International

Bridge Tournament Weekend.

This was yet another reason why Emma had come to Berlin - to play in the bridge tournament.

"Mrs. Peel!" the hotel clerk beamed at her. "Welcome to the Hotel Britannia! I trust you had a good flight. Your suite is ready for you - Aachen here will show you up. (Aachen was a short, smiling bellboy who appeared like a genie out of the lamp when the clerk touched a bell). There will be a reception tonight for our bridge players, 1800 hours. It is to be a costumed reception."

Emma smiled at him. "Thank you."

Once in her hotel room, Emma took a long, refreshing shower. Much as she liked planes and airports, she didn't care for the way the distinctive aroma of them permeated her clothing. She changed into yet another comfortable outfit, and laid out her costume for that evening. All of the bridge players were supposed to come as their favorite playing card. Emma's costume was that of the Queen of Spades.

Without any further delay, Emma went out into the city. She did not hail a cab, but began to walk down the streets.

Her third reason for coming to Berlin was something of a pilgrimage. Her husband, Peter Peel, had been just too young to serve during World War II, but had joined the RAF and flown cargo into West Berlin during the Berlin Airlift of 1949. He had loved the city, and spent several years there, before returning to London to become a test pilot, and where the two of them had met.

He'd talked often of his days in Berlin, and promised that he would take her to see the city, with its four sectors - Russian, English, American and French, and all the complications and red tape that that entailed.

"I've always been fascinated by the city," she had told him. "One city, an island of Western ideals in the midst of communism, surrounded by a high wall erected by a government to keep its people imprisoned. If that's not a damning portrait of communism I don't know what is!"

She smiled now, as she thought of that long-ago conversation. A wave of melancholia rushed over her, very briefly, and receded. She had done her grieving. Anyone married to a test-pilot knows that the end may come at anytime. They had lived their lives together to

the fullest, and while she would still get a pang, when she saw something or felt something that she'd like to share with him and would never be able to, the sadness welled up.

Chapter II

That evening, Emma was at her radiant best. The Britannia's ballroom was full of people dressed as playing cards. They were all bridge experts, and Emma knew most of them.

The costumes were many and varied. Some wore costumes almost like sandwich board, with cards painted on either side. Must be incredibly uncomfortable to dance in costumes like that, Emma mused. Others wore skin tight outfits representing the characters on the playing cards. Emma's costume was one of these. She wore a gown of black and white, and carried a long spear, the top of which was in the shape of a spade.

As Emma circled about the room, meeting old friends and having a brief chat with each, she noticed that there were several people gathered in one corner of the room. Curious, she drifted over. They were all spectators, in a semi-circle around a man seated on a chair. In his left hand he held a pair of scissor, in his right a piece of heavy black construction paper. In front of him was a young woman, standing self-consciously still.

As Emma watched the man in the chair, clad in a tuxedo, and with a crown on his head, worked his long, sharp scissors around the paper quickly and expertly and soon had produced an expert silhouette of her features. Emma's eye was caught by the ring on the man's hand - the spade symbol inlaid in silver. He must be a keen card player.

Finishing the silhouette, the man handed it to his model with a flourish. Then he looked up, and his brilliant blue eyes caught Emma's. He was not handsome, in the conventional sense, his nose being rather too large, but he exuded vitality and charm.

"You", he said, in a German accent, pointing the scissors at Mrs. Peel. "Please, you must allow me to do a silhouette of you."

Emma smiled, flattered, and moved into the forefront of the circle of admirers. The silhouette artist stared at her face very intently for a few seconds, then quickly went to work on the paper in his hand, and there was silent but for the snick, snick, snick of the scissors cutting through paper. At last he held out the silhouette. He had caught her hairstyle, the tilt of her nose, one could even imagine he'd caught the curve of a smile in her cheek.

"It's lovely," she told him, applauding him. He rose and deposited scissors and paper on his chair. "My name is Max Prendergast," he told her.

"Emma Peel. Mrs. Emma Peel."

"Emma. What a beautiful name." He took her arm with easy European familiarity -- the arm that wasn't carrying her sceptre -- and they walked around the room.

"I've heard of you," Emma told him. "One of Germany's best bridge players."

"Among other things," he agreed. "Have you ever been to Berlin before, Emma? If not you must allow me to escort you. This city is not safe for a woman alone."

Oh, surely there's no danger..."

Prendergast shook his head. "On the contrary, my dear. For one reason or another Berlin has become the most exciting city in Europe. Certainly...the most dangerous."

"Well, you're very kind. But I expect I'll be spending most of my time here in the hotel, playing bridge."

"Well, I will have to see if I can't change your mind later. I know all the best sights. All the best sounds."

Before he could say another word however, there was a sound in front of them, as a man burst into the room. He was not dressed in costume but instead wore shabby clothing...and carried a gun.

"Prendergast!" He yelled, and then continued in German, "I know you're here, you pig, you Judas! Show yourself!"

His eyes lit upon the man at Emma's side, but before he had a chance to bring his pistol around, Emma picked up her sceptre and hurled it like a javelin. The weight of the metal was not such that it could penetrate him, but it caused him to lose his grip on his gun. Emma took three long strides forward, and gave him a kick between the legs. He settled into a heap onto the polished marble floor.

"My dear," said Prendergast, "how marvelous of you! The poor man was deranged. Waving a gun around at people like that! Could you understand what he said?"

Emma smiled at him. "I don't speak German," she told him. Prendergast's face relaxed slightly. It was a half-truth. Emma understood several languages, but she rarely spoke in any of them. In her business at Knight Industries it was important to know what people were

thinking, and they were so much more revealing when they were speaking in their own language.

The unconscious man was dragged away without any ceremony by a couple of porters, and the party resumed its festive nature. Not another word was said about it, although Mrs. Peel received a few 'good shows' as people in the crowd passed by.

Emma was thoughtful. "Judas," she thought to herself. Somehow the charming Mr. Prendergast had acquired that sobriquet. She wondered how.

Chapter III

The next morning Emma Peel met with a couple of RAF officials, who knew her because of her husband, Peter Peel. She received tours of various facilities, and had tea with the commander of the airbase.

One of the officers walked her out the gate and flagged down a taxi. "Back to your hotel?" he asked Mrs. Peel.

"Yes, please."

Emma got into the taxi and the driver started up and pulled away. It was only then that she noticed the driver wore a bowler hat. There was no question of it being Peter Peel - for some reason Emma knew immediately that it was John Steed.

"Steed," she said coldly.

"Mrs. Peel."

"I must learn to select my taxi drivers more carefully."

"That would certainly be the case in Berlin," Steed agreed. "However, you must listen to me. I learned of what happened last night."

"Many things happened last night."

"At the costume party," Steed said, impatient of her whimsicalness. "A man tried to kill Max Prendergast. You stopped him. That was a mistake."

"You expected me to just stand by and watch a defenseless man get shot?"

Steed pulled the taxi over to the side of the road and turned to face her. "Mrs. Peel, have you ever seen a movie called *The Third Man*?"

"1949. Orson Welles as Harry Lime. Joseph Cotten. Post-war Vienna. Yes, what about it?"

"Well, move forward sixteen years in time, substitute a snake for Orson Welles, and Berlin for Vienna, and you've got Max Prendergast."

A sense of foreboding rose up in Emma's breast. But she said, "Are you sure? You were wrong about me, remember, not so long ago."

"I can't give you a sheaf of documentary proof, because Prendergast has covered his tracks too well for that. But that man you knocked unconscious - we have him now, and he's being interrogated. If he can give us the proof we need..."

"This is Berlin, 1965!" Emma said. "Surely you can pick up Prendergast on suspicion?"

"It may be Berlin, but this is the British sector," Steed said reprovingly. "Besides, Prendergast has friends in many places. But we're getting close to him now."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"From all reports, Prendergast was quite smitten with you, Mrs. Peel. And you didn't seem to be...unattracted."

'So?' said Emma Peel very coldly. Her eyebrows raised at him dangerously.

Steed gestured. "I just wanted you to know what he was, that's all."

"Well, thank you for telling me, Steed. But it was a needless precaution. I'm going to a Duke Ellington concert tonight. Alone."

"Wouldn't you like to help put Prendergast behind bars?"

She stared at him curiously. "Are you seconding me for police action?"

"Not police action. Not even action for king and country. But action for...the right. God save the right, as the knights of old used to say."

"But don't you have professionals..."

"Sometimes talented amateurs are better than professionals, Mrs. Peel. Please...just think about it."

Chapter IV

Emma sat sipping tea in her hotel room, and munching on shortbread. She had turned on the tv and was listening to programs in German, but her mind was far away.

Although her step-mother had taught her martial arts, Emma had never actually used her skills until just recently. And the feeling of exhilaration she had felt, in using those skills to successfully subdue a villain - she had never felt anything quite like it. Well...had she? Her first solo in her own small plane. Her first hang-gliding off the Cotswolds. All those events had made her feel very alive and so did these small triumphs. Adventure, Mrs. Peel thought. The love of adventure. The same love that had got her husband killed while in the prime of his life. Mrs. Peel smiled. The same love that had caused him to live every minute to the full.

The phone rang, disturbing her reverie. She picked up the phone to hear Steed's voice. "Mrs. Peel, this is urgent. Prendergast must have taken fright at that attack last night. He has a reservation on a plane that leaves in an hour. I'm having a delay getting the appropriate warrants. You've got to delay him for me. If he gets on that plane, we'll lose him."

Emma, conscious of the tone of urgent desperation in Steed's voice, didn't argue. Just, "Delay him how?"

"Use your feminine wiles or something. Please!"

"Alright, Steed. He'll be in my room when you're ready to get him."

"Good. Thank you." said Steed, and he hung up the receiver.

Emma took one glance around her suite. The bed looked very inviting. She grabbed up a handful of magazines and a couple of plush toys she had purchased and strewed them on the bed to make it less so. As she strode out of her room she picked up a bottle of champagne.

She rapped on Max Prendergast's door. A cheerful little rap.

He opened it with a jerk. He wore a tuxedo, but his tie was undone and his normally impeccably coiffed hair was the tiniest bit mussed. "Emma," he said in delight. "'How nice to see you! Please come in. I am busy packing, as you see."

She entered his room. "Leaving so soon?" she said, striving hard to act natural, casual. "The tournament isn't over yet."

"Yes. Unfortunately business calls me away. Unexpected business. I must catch a plane tonight."

"Why, that's too bad," Emma commiserated. "And here I am with a full bottle of champagne and no one to share it with." She displayed it to him.

Prendergast froze as if electrified. His eyes looked at her face avidly. "My dear Emma, what an unexpected invitation."

"But a pleasant one, I hope."

Prendergast closed the lid of his suitcase. "Oh, yes."

"Well, then. You've such a clutter here. Why not come to my room? We can enjoy a glass or two before you leave."

Prendergast looked at his watch, and teetered on his feet like a man on the edge of an abyss. "Very well, my dear. Just a glass. A quick glass." He glanced at his suitcase. "I will just take my suitcase with me, if you don't mind, and leave directly from your room."

"Lovely."

They walked back to Emma's suite. Emma gave him the bottle. "If you will do the honors?"

Prendergast hurried to the sideboard on which stood the glasses, while Emma turned on the little radio that came with the hotel. The song, "Meine lieblich, meine rose" started to play.



"A love song," Prendergast commented.

"Really? So difficult to tell, in German. It's such a ...brutal language."

"Oh, surely not," Prendergast said, handing her a glass of champagne and looking at her intensely. "The language of Goethe, of Mozart...and this song they are playing...it's a very popular one right now. All the little German boys are singing it to their sweethearts."

He looked at Emma with such an expression of love on his face that she simply couldn't stand it any longer. "Feminine wiles, indeed," she said below her breath, and without warning, without hesitation, she punched him on the precise point of his jaw, a blow calculated to leave him unconscious for at least thirty minutes.

Thirty minutes was just long enough. Prendergast stirred feebly as a knocking came. Emma opened the door to Steed and two police officers. Emma was not sure if she was amused or angered by the shock on Steed's face. Had he really thought that she'd occupy Prendergast in her bed until he got around to showing up?

Without ceremony one of the police officers lugged Prendergast to his feet, brought his hands behind his back and snapped on cold steel handcuffs. Prendergast gazed around wildly, at the police officers, at Steed, lastly at her. She saw the naked look of shock and anguish on Prendergast's face as he realized what she'd done, but his emotion bothered her not all. So must all of his victims looked and felt, when they took that much anticipated step into what they thought would be freedom, only to find that the man they had trusted had betrayed them.

The police officers led Prendergast to the door. He passed quite close to Steed and Emma and came to a stop. "Look behind you," he purred, his eyes on Steed. They shifted to Emma. "Often. One day I will be there."

The police officer tightened his grip and Prendergast was led away.

"What a thoroughly unpleasant character," Steed commented.

"Thoroughly," said Emma. She glanced at her watch. "He's made me late for that Duke Ellington concert."

"I have a car waiting downstairs."

As they were driven by chauffeur to the American sector Steed said, "You've done the free world a service, Mrs. Peel. Prendergast will be going away for a long time. In fact I doubt if they will ever let him out."

"Too bad he couldn't have been caught years ago, before he had time to do so much damage, hurt so many people."

"Yes, but the important thing is he was caught in the end."

"Thanks to you," said Steed. He glanced at her. "You enjoyed it, didn't you?"

Emma looked at him, and didn't pretend not to know what he was talking about. But she asked a question that may have appeared as a non sequitur. "When you arrived with the police, you seemed a little surprised to see Prendergast out on the floor, and not ...elsewhere."

"Not at all!" Steed said indignantly. "It was simply that that was such a straightforward thing for you to have done. It reminded me of a friend of mine. I had expected you to take a rather more subtle approach - I thought I'd find the two of you playing a game of chess or gin rummy or something."

"I see," said Emma. She looked out thoughtfully into the darkness. "If he had just been....lusting after me...I suppose I would have played it out that way. Teased him. Toyed with him. But ...I think he truly loved me. I couldn't stand it. I had to knock him out."

"I see," said John Steed. "An intriguing distinction. I shall bear that in mind for future reference, Mrs. Peel."

"You would do well to do so," commented Emma with a grin.

"But that of course means there will *be* a future," said Steed. "And actually, I got word tonight..."

Emma Peel held up her hand. "Not tonight, thank you, Steed. I have a date with a Duke."



Act Five: The Transformed Man

II. After

Emma Peel sat in her office at Knight Industries, a stack of papers before her, but her mind was not on work.

"I'm bored," she thought to herself. "This work is too easy. All routine. So much for the cut-throat world of industrial competition..."

She sighed, rose from her desk and took a trip or two around the room. Knight Industries had been her father's business, and he had always intended her to take over.

Well, she had taken over, five years ago, and she didn't like it.

Emma paused in front of the plate glass window and gazed out at the cityscape below. Just two months since her husband Peter had died. They'd had such good times together - Peter had been a bit of a daredevil and complimented her perfectly. Their five years together had been bliss. After a weekend going hang-gliding or scuba diving or even mountain-climbing with him she'd been able to face the rest of the work week with a passion. And then coming home to him at night - when he'd been at home on rare occasions - more often he'd be off somewhere flying planes. And now he was gone forever, and nothing but dull days stretched before her.

But somehow...they were even more boring now.

That's because she'd had a taste of a different life. A knife-edged life. A life in which the throats that got cut...really bled. A life in which one could feel really alive not by cheating death, but actually by defeating the death dealers.

Saving the world? Emma thought with a smile. Is that what she'd been doing?

That man...with the microfilm. That man John Steed had never really told her what that had been all about...but presumably it had been something important.

Then, on her pilgrimage to Berlin, she had helped to catch Max Prendergast, a ruthless individual who had betrayed hundreds of men, women and their children to their deaths. That had felt like a *real* accomplishment.

She'd like to do more of it. But how? That man Steed was the key.

Emma returned to her desk, opened the bottom drawer and pulled out a bottle, a glass, and a newspaper.

He'd given her his card, a few weeks ago, when she'd driven into the back of his car - but she'd thrown it away after it had turned out he'd merely been investigating her. So, how to find him, short of going down to MI5...or was it 6?, and asking for a man in a bowler hat and an umbrella?

As she sipped her wine, Emma found the page she was looking for - a half-column advertisement for an antique car rally taking place on the grounds of Longleath House, over the week end.

That would be the place.

II.

John Steed's sartorial elegance, if any upon this occasion, was concealed beneath a pair of greasy coveralls, and instead of a broolly he wielded a wrench. It was shockingly early in the morning - but while Steed hated to rise before eight o'clock for anything else, when it came to ensuring that his Bentley was in tip top condition prior to the annual Longleath Run For the Roses he was Johnny-on-the-spot.

He rolled underneath the Bentley to double check various seals and things. As his eagle-eyed gazed searched diligently for anything amiss, he noticed out of the corner of his eye a pair of shapely ankles, and feet encased in a pair of black pumps.

Steed rolled himself from beneath the Bentley with alacrity, and then stopped short with a small frisson of surprise. The woman was tall, with auburn hair that fell in a wave to her shoulders, broad forehead, smiling brown eyes, straight nose...impish grin...still dressed in widow's black...it was Mrs. Emma Peel.

"Mrs. Peel," he scrambled to his feet. "What a pleasure it is to see you again."

She smiled at him. "Mr. Steed. I was hoping to find you here."

"You were?" Steed smiled his most charming smile. "I'm delighted to hear it. There's a little canteen set up over there," he indicated a direction, "Let's go get a coffee."

They settled down at a picnic table and each busied themselves preparing their coffee to their satisfaction.

"It's a glorious sight, isn't it," Steed said, indicating the two dozen ancient automobiles parked on the vast grounds of Longleath House. "And my old girl. One of the best automobiles ever made."

"Oh, I don't know," Emma said thoughtfully. "I've rather liked the Rolls Royce Silver Ghost."

Steed beamed delightedly. "Are you interested in antique cars, Mrs. Peel?"

"Oh, I'm interested in practically everything, Mr. Steed."

Steed raised an eyebrow archly. "In that case, you mustn't call me *Mister*."

Mrs. Peel raised an eyebrow at him in return. "Alright...Steed."

Steed sat back and sipped his coffee. "Well...yes..."

It was Emma's turn to lean forward. "Steed...do you remember Berlin?"

"Vividly."

"I helped you capture Max Prendergast. And you mentioned the future. You wanted there to *be* a future."

Steed leaned forward again, his eyes alight. "Indeed I did."

"Well, so do I. Just exactly what organization do you belong to? MI5? MI6?"

Steed's chin slipped off his hand. "I beg your pardon?"

"Catching crooks. Dealing with diabolical masterminds. That sort of thing. You aren't Special Branch?"

Steed's mouth opened and closed. Several times.

"Are you practicing your fish imitations?" Mrs. Peel asked somewhat acerbically.

"No, not at all. It's just..."

Steed ran his fingers through his hair. He had received a bit of a shock. At first sight of Mrs. Peel he had assumed that she'd come to visit him for himself alone. And instead she was volunteering...actually *volunteering*...to engage in that business which his previous partner Cathy Gale had had to be so cajolingly urged.

"Frankly I'm delighted, Mrs. Peel." he said with a smile. "When I first met you I thought you'd be an excellent associate. I do not belong to MI5 or MI6, however, but rather an offshoot. Let's call it... Department S."

"S for secret?"

"Exactly."

Emma Peel nodded. "Good. Well, Steed, thank you. When does my training start?"

"Training?"

"Of course. I may be an expert martial artist --even if I do say so myself-- and I'm pretty good at quite a lot of things, but certainly I'd have to have some training. Learn codes and things?"

Steed felt like giving an imitation of a fish again, but controlled his jaw muscles. What a professionally-minded woman. He had certainly made a good choice.

"I shall give you all your training, Mrs. Peel. An amateur such as yourself brings a certain ... je ne c'est quoi ...to the job that I don't want drilled out of you by ham-handed trainers."

"I see."

Steed checked his watch. "One thing that is important in a partnership is that the partners get to know each other very well. The tendencies, the habits, the way you react to certain stimuli. The rally is about to start...will you act as my navigator?"

"I'll be delighted," said Emma sincerely.

Steed stood up, unzipped his coveralls and stepped out of them to reveal slacks and a black turtleneck, and he and Emma Peel walked to his Bentley. Steed started the car with a flourish and drove towards the starting line.

III.

Catherine Gale finished writing in her notebook, closed it, closed the book she had been referencing, took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. She glanced at the clock. Five o'clock. How nice. She'd finished right on the stroke of quitting time.

Cathy walked out of her office at the British Museum, nodding at the guards cheerfully, and walked down a couple of blocks to her favorite pub, The Three Vikings, where she'd treat herself to a beer and a shepherd's pie. She was going to see a play later that evening in the West End, with a couple of friends visiting from America who wanted to see that quaint period piece of Agatha Christie's called *The Mousetrap*, which had made its debut in 1958 and was now in its eighth year - the longest running play in the world.

Cathy walked into the Three Vikings and waved at the publican. She was well-known there - the man gave an answering nod. Cathy found a corner booth, deep in the rear of the pub. She pulled a paperback novel from her purse and began to read. Within minutes a mug of beer and a shepherd's pie were placed in front of her. Then another mug was placed across from her. Her server sat down opposite her and Cathy looked up into the eyes of John Steed.

Very slowly, she closed her book.

"Hello, Steed."

"Mrs. Gale."

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Steed watched Cathy take a couple of bites of shepherd's pie, while he himself savored a bit of beer.

"Been enjoyin' yourself?" Steed asked.

"Very much. I've been able to get quite a bit of work done lately."

"Jolly good."

"So whatever you have to say, the answer's no."

"Don't say that before you hear what it is. I just want to ask a favor."

"A favor?" Cathy looked at Steed, a bit puzzled and a bit wary. "What do you mean?" He seemed very odd. A bit embarrassed, a bit unsure of how to proceed.

"I'd like you to meet someone. Give me an evaluation of her."

Cathy arched an eyebrow. "*Her?*"

"Yes...my new partner, you see."

Cathy stared at John Steed for several long seconds, and then she started to laugh.



"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, Steed. I..." she looked down at her beer. "I need something stronger than this. Get me a scotch, would you?"

"Certainly." Steed returned within seconds with a couple of drinks.

"Well?" he said.

Cathy had fitted a cigarette into her cigarette holder and puffed meditatively. "Human beings are wonderful, Steed. I fully expected you to look me up, try to talk me back into the fold. I was going to take great pleasure in squelching you as you deserve. And instead I find that not only am I not wanted, but I've already been replaced! It was a bit of a blow to my ego and I don't mind admitting it."

"No one could ever replace you, Mrs. Gale." Steed said seriously. "But I needed a new partner and fate, or kismet, led me to her. How else could you explain the fact that a girl with her qualities - strength, martial arts skills, was in exactly the right place at the right time."

"What's her name?"

"Peel. Mrs. Emma Peel."

"That name sounds familiar...Steed! The woman whose husband, the test pilot, was killed a couple of months ago?"

"Yes."

"And you've recruited her to play your deadly games?" There was an edge in Cathy's voice.

"Not at all," Steed snapped. Then he relaxed. "That's the thing of it. She volunteered."

Cathy puffed at her cigarette.

"It was a couple of months ago, while you were off in Bermuda. One of One-Ten's schemes went wrong and one of Theirs made off with some microfilm. Ran with it down the streets of London. He made the mistake of running right past Mrs. Peel with a knife in his hand. She swung him into the side of the building and then kicked him where it hurt."

"Oh, good for her."

"Yes. Then a few weeks later she was in Berlin. She happened to attract the interest of Max Prendergast - a rather nasty bit of goods, and helped Us get him. I thought at the time she would be ideal for the work, but I didn't want to press her. I held off for a month."

Cathy's eyes narrowed. "Alright. Who are you and what have you done with the real John Steed?"

Steed gave Cathy one of his patented looks. "That's not funny. The point is, she came to *me*. Said she wanted to play the game."

"She sounds like your kind of woman, Steed."

"Yes...yes, she is." There was a far away look in Steed's eyes, unlike the lascivious ones she usually saw at times like this, that made Cathy stare at the man whom she had known and worked closely beside for two years.

"It seems you already know her qualities. Why do you want *me* to evaluate her for you?"

"Well...not evaluate, really. I just said that because I didn't know quite how to broach the subject. She said she wanted a bit of training. Codes and things. I don't want her going through normal channels. I can teach her a great deal...but so can you."

"How you like your tea stirred, that sort of thing?"

"Well, that, certainly." Steed gave her one of his lascivious looks. "But, I was thinking more along the lines of... I don't know...fashion for the female secret agent. Where you keep your guns and picklocks. How to knock out a gang of men without getting your hair mussed, and still get home in time for dinner. How to stare death in the face and not panic."

Cathy finished her scotch.

"Have you considered that that's why she may be doing this?"

"Do I think she wants to stare death in the face? And meet it?" Steed nodded slowly, his face grim. "I...I'm not sure. I don't *think* so. But I want to be sure."

Cathy returned his nod. So *that* was the reason he'd come to her. "Survivor guilt. Or a death wish. Two reasons why she shouldn't be your partner. You don't think you can judge that?"

"No. I know you can."

Cathy nodded. Steed was well aware of her interest and expertise in psychology and psychoanalysis.

"All right, Steed. I'll meet her....does she know how to fence?"

"I think she knows how to do everything."

"There's no better way to evaluate someone than over a nice bout of fencing. One's whole personality comes to the fore. You have her phone number?"

"Yes."

"Well, ask her to meet me....tomorrow's not good....see if she can't meet me this Wednesday, at Tonetti's Fencing Salon. Noon."

"Noon." Steed nodded. "Thank you, Mrs. Gale."

"Don't tell her who I am, Steed. Or who I *was*," she amended with a grin. "Inform her that I'm merely a physical fitness instructor."

"Well, that might be difficult, Mrs. Gale. You have a reputation in academic circles and Mrs. Peel is quite at home there. She might not know what you did in your spare time, but unless I'm very much mistaken she'll certainly recognize your name."

"A good point. Alright, I'm not Mrs. Gale, then. Tell her I'm Mrs.....Austin."

"Austin. Right."

Steed finished his own drink. "I'll telephone you. Confirm she's coming."

"Right, Steed."

Steed rose to his feet. "Can I escort you anywhere?"

"No, thanks. I'm going to the theatre with friends. I thought I'd spend a bit of time shopping beforehand."

"If you're hunting for clothes I'd be quite happy to come along, give you my opinion on any outfits you'd like to try on."

Cathy laughed. "I was thinking more along the lines of Portobello Road. I should make you come along and carry my parcels, but I won't. It's all right, Steed, I'll let you know about things on Thursday."

Steed was strangely reluctant to go. He liked Cathy Gale...liked her very much in fact...in fact he quite fancied her. Despite the unaccustomed emotions he was feeling over Emma Peel...she was a newly made widow, and out of bounds...for a while at any rate. But he knew Cathy - she'd put him out of her life already, he had no doubt. Moved onward and upward. She was doing him this one favor..or perhaps she was doing the favor for Mrs. Peel.

Steed sighed, tipped his bowler to Mrs. Gale and left the pub. Cathy looked after him for a few seconds, then returned her attention to her shepherd's pie.

IV.

"Mrs. Austin?"

"Mrs. Peel."

"Nice to meet you. Please, call me Emma."

"Certainly. And I'm Cathy."

Catherine Gale and Emma Peel stood just within the doors of Tonetti's Fencing Salon. Mrs. Gale was already in her sparkling, crisp white outfit. She had recognized Emma Peel immediately - she had done some quick background research on her. Emma Peel carried a fencing bag. "Ladies changing room over there, Emma," Cathy told her. Emma nodded, smiled, and disappeared, to return only a few minutes later. She too wore white, but with a

red heart embroidered over her left breast. She carried a foil, and Cathy noted that the bell-guard was scarred from much use.

"Shall we warm up, first," Cathy suggested. "There are some mats over here."

As they performed various stretching and limbering up exercises, Cathy asked, "How long have you been fencing?"

Emma reached out to touch her toes and placed her forehead on her knee.

"Began taking lessons when I was fifteen. For a time I considered entering competition, but then other things intervened.."

"As they have a habit of doing," Cathy agreed.

"I just do it recreationally, now. My club is Corday's."

"Ah, yes. Corday has turned out quite a few good fencers."

Their warm ups finished, the two women proceeded onto the vast, polished hardwood floor. Each wall was mirrored so that the fencers could check their form at any moment. Red lines set into the floor at intervals designated each 'piste,' or fencing area. There were only a couple of other fencers in the salon, off in one corner practicing lunging through rings suspended from the ceiling.

The two women saluted with their foils, donned their masks, and dropped into the *en garde* position, the tips of their foils six feet away from each other.

"*A la*," murmured Cathy, and advanced cautiously. Emma retreated the same number of steps, keeping the distance the same between them. Cathy noted that her form was very classic; while she herself let her left arm dangle behind her casually, Emma kept hers high in the air, hand curved.

Cathy beat her foil against Emma's, bouncing it out of line, and lunged. Emma brought her own foil back and parried with ease.

And so it went on, the two women advancing and retreating down the piste. Cathy was always on the offensive, probing her opponent's every guard...forcing her to do every riposte and parry in the book, and always Emma showed an excellent grasp of technique. And her speed was tremendous. But she seemed to be content to be on the defensive...or perhaps she

too is just feeling *me* out, Cathy mused. And indeed all of a sudden Emma Peel performed a ballestra - a sudden stamp of her foot and a jump forward, and all of a sudden she was attacking furiously and Cathy was back-peddling furiously as she defended herself, then suddenly caught Emma's blade *en prise*, bounced off it and hit Emma's red heart.

Emma lowered her blade immediately. "Hit," she called out cheerfully.

They resumed their fencing distance and began again.

Two hours later they were showered, changed, and in the Charing Cross Tea Room sipping tea and eating cucumber sandwiches. Emma had 'won' the match, by a couple of hits. "I'm quite impressed," Cathy told her. "If you'd kept up with your fencing you could have done great things on the competitive stage."

"Thank you. You're not so bad yourself."

Cathy smiled. She glanced around. They were in a corner booth, no one within earshot. She spoke in a low voice.

"So," she said, "the thought of pitting your wits against diabolical masterminds intrigues you?"

Emma nodded. "Yes. I think I'd be rather good at it."

Cathy debated all the things she could say. It was dangerous work. Well, of course it was. Emma would know that. Steed would put her life at hazard again and again. But he'd always be there to pull the chestnuts out of the fire as well. And this girl definitely would be able to pull her own chestnuts out of the fire. Steed had certainly chosen a winner.

"Tell me about your background," Cathy invited. "You run Knight Industries, don't you?"

"That's right." Emma went on to explain how her father had groomed her for the role of his successor. Her achievements at school. The death of her mother and her father's subsequent remarriage to a Japanese woman whom he'd met on a business trip to Japan. A woman who might have been the spiritual descendant of Tomoe Gozen, one of the great Samurai women of Japan. Her marriage to Peter Peel. Their five years of marriage. His death.

"Only two months ago," Cathy murmured.

Emma nodded, sipping her tea. "When one is married to a test pilot, one gets used to the idea

of death," she said. "It was an utter shock when I heard it, don't mistake me, and I mourned him and am still in mourning. Not a day goes by when I don't see something he bought me, or remember something he said...and feel a flash of sadness that he's no longer here to share my life."

Cathy nodded. Emma Peel had had an easier time of it - if one could put it like that - then *she'd* had, with her husband killed right beside her by Mau Mau terrorists. Well, she'd had the satisfaction of killing some of them in return.

"Can you kill?" she asked abruptly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You are up against a couple of villains - who will have no scruple in killing you. You've got a gun in your hand. Would you shoot them?"

"I don't know if I'd shoot to kill," Emma said thoughtfully. "I'd certainly incapacitate them."

Cathy nodded. She believed that.

"Alright, Emma," she said. "As I believe Steed told you, he's going to be doing any training you might require, in this business, this Circus, as some call it. But I think you've got the right stuff."

"Thank you, Cathy. Tell me about Steed."

Cathy arched an eyebrow. "John Steed? He's quite a man. Dedicated to his country. He's educated, charming, intelligent. A real ladies' man."

Emma raised her own eyebrow. "Somehow I gathered that," she commented with an impish smile.

Cathy leaned forward. "He also has all the qualities needed of an expert secret agent. Ruthlessness. Nerves of steel. An inventive mind. You could have no better tutor."

Emma nodded.

"And if you're going to work with Steed, you're going to need some additions to your wardrobe. Let's go shopping."

V.

"You've got an eye for quality, Steed. I'll give you that."

Cathy Gale and John Steed stood in the Dinosaur room of the British Museum Department of Natural History. It was where they had first met, when Steed had come to ask an expert's opinion on the uses of black magic.

"She'll do, then?"

Cathy nodded. "She'll do."

Steed sighed. "Good."

They walked about in silence, looking at the exhibits. "It was a good run, wasn't it, Mrs. Gale?" Steed said at last.

"Yes. A good run. But the curtain comes down on every run, sooner or later. The actors switch over, and a new play starts."

They stopped near the entrance. It was John Steed's exit cue. He looked at Cathy Gale, his face serious. "I always did fancy you, you know," he told her.

Cathy nodded, but forbore to smile. "I know. And if you hadn't been such a cad I might have allowed myself to fancy you, as well. Remember that, Steed, in your dealings with Emma Peel."

She offered her hand to Steed. He took it in the tips of his fingers and raised his hand to her lips. "I'll remember, Mrs. Gale. Always."

VI.

The telephone rang. John Steed reached out a hand and grabbed the receiver in a strangulation grip. "Yes?"

"We've got trouble. Sir Clive Todd has just been found...stealing top secret documents."

Steed sat up, wide awake.

"Sir Clive *Todd*? The millionaire"

"That's right. He was shot - by one of his own men, apparently. He's been taken to his own house to convalesce. Get down there, Steed. Now."

"I'm on my way."

Steed hung up the phone, then picked it up again and immediately redialed.

A sleepy voice answered him.

"Mrs. Peel. Steed here. You said you wanted in on the game. Well, get dressed. Something's afoot. I'll be over to pick you up in half an hour."

Steed slid out of bed, showered, dressed, ran down to his Bentley and drove towards Mrs. Peel's flat. She was waiting outside the door of the building, dressed in a toasty fur coat and muff and looking like she was asleep standing up.

"The middle of the night," she mumbled at Steed.

"In you get, Mrs. Peel, you can sleep on the way."

He helped Mrs. Peel into the passenger seat, where she immediately fell asleep. Steed pointed his Bentley toward Sir Clive Todd's house...and drove into history.



The Steed Identity

A story in five chapters

Chapter 1

The man on his knees in the prison corridor was John Steed, but you couldn't tell it by looking at him.

It had happened quickly and unexpectedly. The guard had maced him, then grabbed his arm and fulcrumed him face first into the concrete wall of the prison corridor. Now Steed was on his knees, digging his fists into his eyes against the agony, the tears streaming from his eyes mixing with blood from his nose making an unpleasant lump in his mustache, and making his shirt a soggy mess. Oh god he was in pain.

Suddenly a strong arm encircled his shoulders, and a body pressed to his, comfortingly. A female body. "Basil," a woman's voice whispered urgently, close to his ear. "Basil, it's all right. It's me, Lola. It's all right, Basil."

So Lola thought it was all right, did she? Nice for her to think so. And he was...Basil? What kind of a name was that for a chap? Unless he was Basil Rathbone? Jesus, he was getting delirious. He dug his fists even harder into his eyes. He wished Lola would knock him unconscious, put him out of this agony.

"It's me, Basil." the woman repeated again, urgently. "It's me, Lola. We've come to get you out, remember? We're alright. I've taken care of that bastard of a guard for you." Her voice was very steely as she said this, and through the red mists of pain he was gratified to hear it. He felt the pressure of her arm around him as she tried to get him to rise. He tried to move, but felt himself falling forward, till she steadied him.

"Drummond," she whispered, a bit louder. "Help me with him."

Another pair of hands, men's hands this time, gripped him from the other side, and he found himself on his feet. He couldn't take his fists away from his eyes, so they each had a grip on one of his biceps, while the woman, Lola, had one arm around his waist as well. "Steady on, Basil," she whispered to him, calmly and comfortingly. "We're almost out."

He did nothing but move his legs, letting them steer him in the right direction and indicating what kind of speed they wanted out of him. His teeth were gritted against the pain, against the agonizing grunting that he wanted to let loose except he knew the need for quiet here.

Suddenly they came to a stop, and another voice, a Cockney man's voice, hissed "Bleedin' hell. What's this? He can't see? Leave him! He's going to be a liability!"

"He's who we came for, you idiot," Lola's voice snapped. "We're almost out of here so let's go, damn you."

"Right, right," the Cockney mumbled. Then they were moving again. He could do nothing except follow the lead of his two escorts and keep his teeth gritted together. They seemed to know where they were going without hesitation and thank god for that. Suddenly he felt himself being led through a door and then out into fresh air, with his feet scraping on pavement. He was jerked to a sudden halt, there was the sound of a car door opening, then Lola raised a hand and put it against the back of his head. "We're at the car, Basil. Bend yourself down and crawl in."

Somehow he found himself in the backseat of the car, sliding all the way over to the far end. Lola got in next to him and he was grateful for the warmth of her leg against his, the pressure of her arm over his shoulders, her other hand on his chest. A slight jolt as someone else, that Drummond fellow, got in with them.

"It's all right, Basil," Lola said again, as the engine started and the car started moving forward at a sedate pace. "We're only twenty minutes from the house. We'll get you cleaned up and feeling as good as new."

Basil. Was that his name, Basil? It didn't sound familiar at all. But then, neither did Lola or Lola's voice and yet he must know her. *He couldn't remember his name.* He couldn't remember *anything*. He'd been...he must have been...in prison, and they were breaking him out. And he had to wait another twenty minutes before they could do something to stop this pain? He couldn't help it - a moan escaped through gritted teeth.

"Drummond," Lola snapped. "Verret. Finley. Does one of you have a flask? Is there *some* kind of liquor in this car?"

"What a load of old cobblers," Verret - the Cockney, said. "So this is the great Basil."

He felt Lola move beside him. She leaned forward in a violent motion and...he heard a thud and a gasp of pain. Had she actually shoved Verret's head into the dashboard? That's certainly what it sounded like! Good for her!

"That's just a taste, Verret," she said coldly, settling back in her seat. "And when Basil regains the use of his eyes he's not going to be happy with you, so you'd better not say

another word."

"Uh, here, Lola," came Drummond's voice - an American voice. "Whisky."

"Thank you, Drummond."

He heard the sound of the cap being unscrewed, and then, "Here, Basil, I'm bringing it to your lips."

He opened his mouth and the golden elixir was pouring down his throat. He swallowed. The fireball hit him in the belly and exploded outward, causing him to shiver uncontrollably for a few seconds. But it felt great. The pain in his head lessened just a trifle.

He'd better say something. Comfort Lola. "I'm all right," he said thickly. "Just..." he wasn't going to say *anything* about losing his memory. There was at least one unfriendly person in this car, and it seemed he had a reputation that he'd better be able to live up to. "Just...can't see."

Lola squeezed his shoulders. "That's just the mace. We'll get that cleaned up as soon as we get to the house. We're in the clear now."

It was impossible to think, feeling like this. He wasn't even going to *try* to think. Thinking was for later. All he was trying to do was survive, to not break down and blubber like a baby. He concentrated only on the warmth of Lola's knee against his, her arms around him, and the effort of getting air into his lungs between gritted teeth, for air didn't seem to be going through his nose.

The car stopped, car doors opened, he levered himself out and stood, waiting. Again Drummond and Lola took his arms, and helped him into the house. "Let's take him into the bathroom in my room, Drummond." Lola said. "Then you can leave him to me."

She helped him undress and put him into the shower, turning the water to a nice, hot temperature. "Just let it run over your face," she told him calmly. "Don't try to open your eyes yet. Just let the water wash over your eyes. I'm holding you, don't worry. Stay here as long as you need to."

God it felt good. The needles of water pelted his face, pelted his eyelids, but it was a good pain, and there was warmth, warmth everywhere. Lola's hands were on his shoulders...he knew she must be getting soaked. "I wish..." he tried to say, swallowed bile, "Get in with me."

"Why, 'Basil'," Lola said. There was a tone in her voice when she'd said his name that he couldn't identify, but then she chuckled softly and said, "Alright. Prop yourself against the wall for a second or two."

He couldn't hear her undressing, but that's what she must have done because when he felt her body next to his in the shower it was smooth and soft. She embraced him, and he felt her breasts against his chest and he lowered his head. Her lips met his. They kissed, long and deeply.

"God I was frightened back there," she whispered, holding him tightly.

"You didn't show it." he murmured. Somehow he knew she'd take that as a compliment.

"Well, it's all right now. We'll get your eyes cleaned up. By tomorrow you should be able to see fine. You'll have to teach Verret a lesson, though."

"Must I? I heard you take care of him."

He heard her chuckle. "Rather good, wasn't it. Must remain in character, eh?"

He felt her raise her head, and once more bent his mouth to hers.

When they parted again she said, "This isn't doing your eyes any good, and we've got to get those cleaned out. Behave yourself, 'Basil.'

Again she had pronounced his name in that funny way, as if it were an in-joke that they shared. But he stood quietly, his hands resting on her hips, as she took a washcloth and gently wiped his eyes. Let the water play over his face and then wiped his eyes once more. Again and again she did this...until finally he tried to open his eyes and saw little slits of light and a blur of pink...he could see her.

After another half hour, Lola helped him out of the shower. They toweled themselves off, and then Lola led him to the bed. He heard her pull the bedspread and a blanket back, and then she placed her arms on him in order to help him into bed. He wasn't having any of that. She could *see* what he wanted. He pressed himself up to her, and she lay back underneath him with an amused chuckle. His eyes were half-open, he could see her, the water-darkened blond hair, the tanned face, the blue eyes with a laughing glint in them, the lips open invitingly. He tugged her up a bit further onto the bed and then climbed astride her. "I've been waiting for this," he said huskily. "All right?"

"All right," she murmured, reaching for him.

After they were finished, he lay back, breathing deeply. "A perfect end to a perfect day," he said.

Lola actually laughed out loud. "You're incorrigible, 'Basil.'"

She scooped close to him, and put an arm across his chest and rested her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her shoulders, squeezed briefly, and planted a kiss on the top of her head.

Soon she was asleep, but he lay awake, staring with half-closed eyes at the ceiling, and now there was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't recognized Lola. She'd been good...really good...but it hadn't sparked any kind of memory. And he couldn't remember his name. And he was some kind of criminal. That didn't ring a bell, either. But if he was a criminal...then Lola must be one also.

He raised his free hand to his face, and made as if to pinch the bridge of his nose. But as he touched it his eyes opened wide with pain, which caused him to wince with yet more pain. God but his nose was tender. It must be broken. He closed his eyes. Of course. Just what he needed. He brought his hand down, and began to beat a thoughtful tattoo on his chest...but it was no good...slowly his fingers stopped moving and he fell asleep.

Chapter 2

I.

When he woke up, Lola was gone. He felt an inexplicable sense of loss, until he heard noises in the lav and realized she must be in there. He looked up at the ceiling. His heart sank. No miraculous memory recovery. Basil...he said to himself....Basil....he didn't even know his last name. Very slowly he got out of bed. There was a mirror above a wardrobe on one side of the room. He walked over to it and looked at his reflection...something he hadn't done last night.

He didn't recognize himself. He was...what, about six foot three? Salt and pepper hair cut short, bushy eyebrows over bright red eyes...and a black crescent under each eye..."Good God," he murmured aloud. He forced himself to continue the catalog...a long, straight nose, a toothbrush mustache, full lips, a bit of a beard stubble. Fortyish, he must be.

He turned to one side...his shoulders sloped a bit. He flexed his bicep...not too bad.

Stomach....just a bit of a paunch there. Was he 'the great Basil,' as that Cockney git had put it the other night? Well, perhaps these eyes of his would strike fear into the hearts of men, but that was about it.

Lola entered the room, elegant silk bathrobe trailing behind her, like something out of an old Jean Harlow movie. She caught sight of him, and stopped, her face a study. "Oh,...." her lips moved, but he couldn't tell what the next word she said was. She came over to him. She had recovered herself in that second. "You're a sight," she told him, smiling.

"I look like a raccoon," he admitted. "But I'm a raccoon who can see."

"Yes." She caressed the side of his cheek with her hand, and he moved closer and kissed her.

She broke the kiss first. "Well, we'd better get dressed and go meet the goons. Oops." She put her hand to her mouth and chuckled. "I shouldn't talk like that," she said, very quietly, moving her finger in a circular motion around the room and then pointing to her ear. What was she indicating - the room might be bugged?

"Ye-es..." he said. He swallowed. "Lola..."

"Something wrong?" she asked, concerned.

"I....Lola....I..." he shrugged, and smiled briefly. "Nothing. I'll get dressed."

II.

They followed their noses to the dining room. Five men were seated around the table, plates heaped high before them. A half-dozen chafing dishes resided on the sideboard. The men looked up as they entered. The one with the knot in the center of his forehead must be Verret, the great Cockney git. They were tough looking men. He'd better do something to establish himself right away.

"All right, gentlemen," he said, "thanks very much for getting me out, last night. Now, take a good look at the eyes, because I don't want to hear anything more about them. Right?" He removed the dark sunglasses that Lola had found for him, leaned forward onto the table and looked directly at Verret. Verret's eyes dropped to his plate.

There were various hasty murmurs of assent.

"Right," he said, putting the glasses back on. He turned to look at Lola. "After you, my dear."

After they sat down with their full plates, the man on the corner cleared his throat. He had an American accent, and he recognized the voice even before the man named himself. "Right, I guess we'd better introduce ourselves. I'm Drummond. This is Howard. Uh...him in the middle is Verret. Then there's Finley. And that's Wilde."

He nodded at them. "Gentlemen."

"Galaxy should be here in a few minutes," Drummond said.

Galaxy? And just who was Galaxy? Was he supposed to *know* Galaxy?

"That will give us time to finish our breakfast then, won't it, Lola?" he said calmly.

She nodded, a faint smile on her lips.

III.

Galaxy was a woman. A large woman, with a Margaret Rutherfordish-air, commanding both in size and presence. She led the way into a large, oak-paneled office, and took her place behind a desk which looked immense until she sat there. He and Lola seated themselves in comfortable leather chairs facing her.

Galaxy steepled her fingers and looked at them both for some seconds. He looked at Lola out of the corner of his eye, and saw her relaxed, legs crossed gracefully, quite composed. But she wasn't speaking. Clearly this was Galaxy's party. He composed his features into a look of mild inquiry.

"Lola," Galaxy said at last. "Basil. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. I am so glad we were able to assist you in ...exiting your places of incarceration."

"And we appreciate it," Lola said.

Galaxy nodded majestically. She bent her gaze on him. "Basil. Your glasses, if you please."

He removed the sunglasses, and she looked at his eyes, her face expressionless. Then she nodded, and he took this as a sign to return the glasses to his eyes.

"An unfortunate incident," Galaxy said. "And while the style of wearing dark glasses indoors has a certain charm, it won't do for our purposes. Nothing must draw attention to you two. The timetable must be put back....one week, I think. That should give your eyes more than sufficient time to heal."

He nodded. "Seven days should be ample, Galaxy."

"Good. And perhaps its for the best. I want this assassination to be quick and clean, with no muss and no fuss."

Had she said.....*assassination*?

"You've both been...on ice...for the last two years. While your skills and knowledge are of course still there, which is why I wanted you for this organization and for this particular...um, job, shall we say , it is inevitable that there is some dulling of the senses. You'll now have seven days to get back in shape, as it were."

Again he looked at Lola out of the corner of his eye. Again she appeared calm, composed. *Assassination*? They were *assassins*? Him, and his beautiful, passionate Lola? Cold-blooded killers?

"You have facilities here?" Lola asked. "Target range? Dojo?"

"Of course. Everything you need. A weapons room, a weight room. Even a full scale obstacle course out in the grounds. I believe in keeping my agents in the peak of condition. In fact...."

She looked from him to Lola and back.

"There's no reason for you and Lola to leave the grounds at all in the next seven days. We have a cordon bleu chef, a game room, a library, even our own movie theatre."

His head was still reeling from the assassination revelation, but he was doing his best to concentrate. Should he assert himself here? Play the part of big, bad Basil? Because it certainly sounded like Galaxy didn't want them to leave the grounds....at all.

What the hell? he thought.

"There may be no reason to leave the grounds," he said, attempting an easy tone, "but what if we wanted to leave the grounds, just for the hell of it? Is that acceptable?"

Galaxy smiled. "Of course, Basil. You are not prisoners here. I have perfect trust in all of my associates, and you and Lola are now the cream of the crop."

He nodded, to show he was satisfied. "All right then. As you say, there's no reason for us to leave. Especially when there must be broadcasts out after us." He glanced at Lola as he said this, and she nodded.

"That's a point," Lola said. "We need to change our appearance."

Galaxy nodded also. "I have a hairstylist on hand. I suggest dye jobs and new hairstyles. That's usually enough to change one's appearance completely. "

"I was thinking of something else," Lola said, casually, giving him a mischievous smile. She seemed to be trying to give him a cue, he thought, but he couldn't react to it because he didn't know what she wanted! He merely shrugged and smiled weakly. She looked at him for a couple more seconds, then turned to Galaxy, who said, "What do you mean?"

"This is going to sound like science fiction," Lola said slowly, "but believe me, it's true. There's a machine. The Kellmar Machine. It is a ...thought transfer device. More than that. It's a soul transfer device. It's a machine that would allow us - Basil and me, to be transported into the bodies of anyone else whom we choose."

His mouth went dry. Science fiction indeed, but since Lola was saying it, it must be true. What kind of a nightmare was he in?"

Galaxy was speaking. He concentrated desperately. "Your history is not unknown to me, Lola. I have heard of this machine. That was your mission, two years ago, wasn't it? To take over the bodies of John Steed and Emma Peel. But, you failed. The machine was destroyed."

"The machine was *not* destroyed," Lola said calmly. "Or rather, there were two. One was stashed away as a backup. And I know where it is."

Galaxy stared at Lola for several seconds. "If this machine is still operational...there is *nothing* we could not accomplish."

Lola smiled triumphantly. "Precisely. Galaxy, I suggest you let us complete that mission. We take over the bodies of Steed and Mrs. Peel. They go into *our* bodies, and then, um," she glanced at him with a smile on her lips, "We let Basil and Lola be captured again. Or better yet, killed while attempting to escape."

He took off the sunglasses and rubbed his eyes, then put them back on. Good God. Lola...talking so casually about murder. And he...obviously he was as unprincipled as she was. This was more than a nightmare. This was the *Twilight Zone*. Why was it that he could remember the names and plots of television shows but he couldn't even remember his own name?

"Yes, Basil?" said Galaxy.

She wanted him to speak? Or she was just concerned because he'd rubbed his eyes? He managed what he hoped was an insouciant grin. "Lola and I think as one in this matter."

Galaxy nodded. "Well. You've given me something to think about. To have Steed and Emma Peel working for me....oh, yes....*anything* could be accomplished. Where is this machine, Lola?"

Lola shook her head. "I'd rather not say at this precise moment, Galaxy. Please understand. We are now your..top agents. And we're very grateful to you. But that machine....the power of that machine is indescribable. While we trust you - we don't trust your agents. Not with that machine."

Galaxy stared at her for a long time. "I take your point, Lola," she said at last. "You want this machine to be...exclusive."

"Yes. Once we capture Steed and Mrs. Peel, we take them to that machine. You come along, of course. We make the transference then. Only we three will know where that machine is or that it even exists."

Galaxy nodded. "Very well. I shall...institute proceedings. Find out where Steed and Emma are at this exact moment. But, I wonder if they will be so easy to capture."

"We caught them two years ago with ease," Lola said briskly. "It's because we didn't kill them right away that the mission failed. Give those two the slightest of avenues for victory and they will find a way to win out. We won't make that mistake again, Galaxy."

"I believe you. Very well. As I said, I shall have Steed and Emma located for you. It will be a simple task."

"Simple? You're highly placed then, Galaxy, in the government?" Lola said casually.

Galaxy smirked. "Not me, Lola. But I have a couple of very good friends who are. Leave

everything to me. Now," she continued briskly, "I see it's almost ten. The boys will be at the firing range. Why don't you go in and show them what you can do?"

"Lovely," said Lola, rising. "Will you be joining us?"

"I'll stop by later on. See how you're doing."

As they walked in the direction of the firing range, following Galaxy's directions, Lola said very quietly, "Gun range. Dojo. Obstacle course. They're going to be testing us."

"Untrusting sods," he said, a trifle more viciously than he meant to sound. But really. Shooting guns. Beating up people. Running over an obstacle course. And him without a memory or knowledge of *any* of that. He was up the creek without a paddle, without a canoe, and without a creek.

"Are your eyes still troubling you?" she asked.

If he did badly - and he would, he'd need *some* kind of excuse. "They're bothering me a bit," he said, trying to make it sound as if it were a grudging omission.

She caressed his arm. "Not to worry. I'll put on a show for them."

The gun range was one long room at the end of the house. At the far wall, hanging from hooks, were targets, which could be brought forward or back on a ceiling rail a specified number of meters. In the front of the room were five alcoves, in which the shooters stood while they took their turns. All five of them were there, wearing ear protectors and carrying...Berettas, he recognized in surprise. He was shocked at the intensity of anger he felt. How could he know the names of those guns, and not remember his own name, where he was born, who his family was, nothing! He glanced out at the targets...shots scattered all around but very few in the heart area of *any* of the targets. His heart rose just a bit...maybe he wouldn't look so bad after all.

"Galaxy suggested we come down," Lola said cheerfully. "Basil's eyes are still bothering him, but I thought I'd like to give it a go. Set up a target for me, Verret."

While Verret selected a clean target and placed it in position, Lola put on a pair of ear protectors, then took the pistol Munsey held out to her. "Right," she said. She stepped into one of the alcoves, while the men gathered around behind her, anticipatory smirks on their faces. Lola turned her body so that she faced the target from the side, extended her arm, and pulled the trigger seven times.

When the echo of the shots died away, there were six very silent men in the firing range. Lola had aimed at the crotch of her target, and where there had once been a crotch there was now one big hole.

Lola looked back at them, grinning. Then, with practiced ease, she shook out the expended clip and slipped in a new one. This time she took up a position facing the target, her left hand supporting the butt of the gun, her legs slightly flexed. And then she pulled the trigger seven times.

Verret pressed the button which brought the target sliding up to them. He picked it off the hook and looked at it, swallowing hard, and then handed it to Munsey, who handed it to Wilde, who handed it to another man until they'd all had a look at it. The last seven bullets had gone straight through the heart.

Steed/Basil gestured at Lola. "I'm with her," he said casually.

Only Drummond and Lola laughed. The others were only able to manage weak smiles. Verret's face was rather white.

"Well," Steed/Basil said, "I'm going to go to my room for a little bit. Have fun."

He took a long shower, resting his forehead against the cold porcelain while the hot water pelted his back and ran down his legs. Then he toweled himself dry and slipped into the bed where he lay, staring at the ceiling out of his red eyes.

Was he really a cold-blooded killer? The mere thought of it filled him with abhorrence. He *could* kill, certainly. People who didn't deserve to live. Murderers, rapists, pedophiles, scum like that. He'd put them down without compunction. But...but...*he* was apparently a murderer, too. Lola was a murderer. So on the one hand, *now*, with no memory, he thought murderers were scum, but *with* his memory he had no problem with it? How could that be?

And what of Lola, he wondered. If she lost her memory, would she *still* be a cold-blooded killer? Or would she be...like him....

V.

They dined *en famille* that night - everyone present except Galaxy. What did cold-blooded assassins talk about when they sat down to dine, he wondered.

Horses, apparently. And how much money was lost on them.

Lola and he sat together, eating quietly. They excused themselves afterwards, and went to their room.

"You were awfully quiet tonight, Basil," Lola said. "Are you feeling all right?"

He kissed her. "I'm fine. Just very tired. I'm going to go to bed early."

"All right. I brought a book from the library."

"Oh, what are you reading?"

She displayed the cover. *Evil Under The Sun*, by Agatha Christie. "I was in the mood for a little fluff," she explained. "Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers seem to be the fiction writers of choice in this household. Tea cosy mysteries."

"I'm surprised. I would have expected Mickey Spillane. James Hadley Chase. Or perhaps Eric Ambler."

She laughed, that lovely contralto laugh of hers that had been sending shivers up his spine ever since the first time he had heard it. "Good night, my dear," he said quickly, turning over and burying his face in a pillow.

VI.

The next two days went by very quickly. With the excuse of his eyes, he didn't have to indulge in any shootings or any fisticuffs. But that was all right because Lola took up the slack. She 'bouted' with all of the men, in any martial art they proposed, and beat all of them except Drummond, to whom she lost at judo. She made up for that loss on the fencing piste. And on the firing range she had no equal.

As he watched her, his admiration could not help but grow. She must have been training in the martial arts for years. She was so skilled, so fast, confident and powerful. How had she come to acquire all these skills? A sickening thought occurred to him - had she seen her career, as a hired assassin, and decided to train for it from an early age?

And yet, she was so poised, so elegant, so feminine, intelligent and sophisticated with him. In the evenings they discussed classical music, the theatre, philosophy, history, exchanging ideas and opinions, their senses of humor matching, everything.

Why, *why* could he remember plays that he must have seen over two years ago, music he'd

heard, opinions on politics he'd had, and yet he couldn't remember his own name? And more than that. If these were his true feelings, for the theatre, for the movies, for the arts, for philosophy, than couldn't they be his true feelings for killing? And if so, *how* could he have been a conscienceless killer? Had he done it all for the love of Lola?

VII.

The next morning, he entered the firing range with Lola to find themselves the sole occupants of the place. Well. Well. If he were going to find out his shooting skills, now was the time to do it. Perhaps he should have Lola shoot the target out for him, and then he could pass it off as his own. He sighed.

"Here you go, 'Basil,'" Lola said, placing his ear defenders over his ears and giving his face a caress. "Give it your best shot."

He took the gun she handed him. He stood facing the target, flexed his knees a bit, and supported the butt of the gun with one palm while aiming with the other. He breathed and squeezed simultaneously. Had it gone into the bullseye? He squeezed the trigger again, and again, and again. When he'd finished the clip Lola pressed the button and the target came zooming forward. He looked at it. Not quite as good as Lola's, but better than the five apes in men's clothing. Two bullet holes through the heart, the rest scattered around it within a couple of inches.

"Basil, baby," Lola said, in a seductive murmur, "For someone who hates guns, you shoot very well."

"Yes," he said, absently. It had been easy. So easy. Point, pull, and bullets struck the target. If it had been a human being he'd be dead now. So, his memory was gone but he could still shoot. Was it safe to assume he could probably still...kick butt, as the Americans said, as well? Very likely. He was still a first class killing machine.

VIII.

They were walking arm and arm through the obstacle course. Lola was amusing herself, and him, by pointing out various obstacles and making caustic comments.

So, he thought to himself. So. He *was* a killer.

But, he didn't want to be. And he didn't want Lola to be.

They were in the obstacle course, to be sure, but it was out in the open and there was no way it could be bugged. He turned, faced Lola, grabbed her arms. "Do you love me?" he demanded.

She stared at him, half stunned, half laughing. "What kind of question is that?"

He tightened his grip and pulled her closer, roughly. "Do you love me?"

She stared at him, at the urgent look in his eyes, the naked appeal in his face.

"Yes." she said, very quietly.

He kissed her, crushing her to him, pressing her warmth to him. Her arms wrapped around his back. Finally they broke apart. Still holding her, he said, hoarsely, "Let's get out of this."

"What?"

"Let's get *out* of this. We don't have to do this."

His heart sank. She looked stunned, unbelieving - unaccepting.

"What are you talking about? What's wrong? Things are going great! We can't leave now!"

"Please, Lola," he said.

Her eyes widened. Very slowly she said, "Lola?" Her face was horror-struck.

"Don't look at me like that, Lola," he said desperately. "I just want us both out of this, that's all."

Now she grabbed *his* arms, shook him. "What's your name?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

He stood in front of her, defenseless. "I don't know," he said quietly. "Ever since the night when I got slammed into the wall...I can't remember. I don't know who I am."

"My God," she said. "My God. I should have known. Listen, listen, it's all right. You're not..." at that very second, she was interrupted by a very shrill whistle. She whirled around, and only a few meters away from them, Drummond and Wilde were approaching.

"Damn," she said softly. She whirled back to him, taking his hands. "It's all right," she told him urgently, staring into his eyes. "It's not what you think, okay? We're going to make it through this...hullo Drummond, Wilde. Ready to try the obstacle course?"

"Galaxy sent us to fetch you," Munsey replied. "She said it was urgent."

"Then let's not keep her waiting." Lola took his hand, and they started walking briskly towards the house.

All right, he said to himself, all right. The rubicon was passed, and Lola as still at his side. And with her at his side, he could do anything. He glanced down at her, lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. She winked at him.

Chapter 3

"Ah, Basil. Lola." Galaxy greeted them warmly. "Set yourselves down, set yourselves down. I have exciting news."

Lola settled herself into a chair, and he perched on the seat arm, continuing to hold her hand. Munsey and Wilde found chairs of their own. So, the gang was all there.

Galaxy steepled her fingers together. "Lola. Things moved faster than I had expected. Mrs. Emma Peel has already been isolated. Or rather, she will be isolated tonight. We cannot lose this opportunity. We take her tonight."

He gripped Lola's hand hard. No. No.

"That's wonderful, Galaxy," Lola said calmly. "How on earth did you manage it so quickly?"

Galaxy smirked. "I told you I had friends in high places. I had one of them invite Mrs. Peel to a bridge tournament tonight - in a rather isolated spot. Her friend Steed is *not* accompanying her."

Lola laughed, that low contralto laugh. "Poor Mrs. Peel."

"Yes," 'Basil' said, through tight lips. "Poor Mrs. Peel."

"I knew you'd be pleased. So - in order to get their in time you have to leave now. Lola. Drummond, Finley, and Wilde."

"Wait a minute," he said. "What about me?"

"The tournament is taking place at a posh country estate," Galaxy told him. "Sunglasses at night are more unacceptable than sunglasses indoors during the day."

"I should be in the car, when they bring her out," he said, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. What could he say to convince her? Why wasn't Lola saying something? If Emma Peel was anything like Lola.... "You're going after Emma Peel, remember. Three men and Lola are not enough."

"On the contrary," Lola said, disengaging his hand and poking him in a playful manner. "Three men and Lola are too many. I can handle Mrs. Peel quite well on my own. Both in capturing her and in...disposing of her afterwards, Galaxy."

"Oh, quite. You and I alone will be there for the disposal, Lola, never fear. But I want you accompanied by some back up. Basil, I appreciate the fact that you and Lola work as one, but not this time. You have not yet shown that you are recovered from your incarceration. You will remain here. We will return...when we return. Gentlemen, Lola, let us go."

"Lola," he turned to her.

"It's all *right*, Basil," she told him, grasping his hands in hers and gazing into his eyes. "It's all right. Trust me."

As he watched them go, hot rage built up inside him. He'd outsmarted himself. Avoided the fighting, the gunplay, thinking he was so clever to do so, and as a result he was trapped inside this house while Lola was free to leave. And she'd not hesitated to do so, damn her. 'It will be all right," indeed. God, he wanted to believe her...he wanted to trust her...but he didn't.

He pivoted to see Verret and Howard looking at him, grinning.

"Right," he said savagely. "Let's go to the dojo, gentlemen."

Once in the dojo, the men slipped off their shoes, but he was raging too much to bother with changing into uniforms of any kind. "Freestyle, gentlemen. Whatever you want to do," he said.

Verret came at him first, swinging his arms like huge windmills. His eyes widened as he saw the big bulk coming at him, but he wasn't *thinking* in his reactions. It was all instinctual, as

if years of training his muscles had taught them what to do and they needed no input from his brain to react. There was no hesitation. He slid inside the whirling fists, wrapped his arms around Verret's back, lifted him up, and rushed him into the wall which Verret hit, hard. He dropped Verret, who slid down to his knees, arcing his back against the pain, and turned to Howard.

Howard assumed the stance of a karateka. He circled him, bouncing lightly on his feet. Howard gathered himself, sidestepped and launched a lightning fast roundhouse kick at his head. He block the kick by catching it against his arms, and the impact sent his forearms shrieking in pain. Howard laughed, moved to his left, and then spun around with a back kick. It was so quick that it caught him in the belly and sent him staggering backward.

Paunch or not, he could take a kick. He straightened, sucking in air, and the next time Howard came at him he grabbed the kicking leg - and kicked Howard's other leg out from under him.

He sensed movement behind him and hunched over just as Verret landed on his back. He used that momentum to rush forward toward the wall, pivoted at the last moment, and once more sent Verret's back crashing into it.

He was breathing hard, but the adrenalin was flowing and god it felt good. He went after Howard, and incredibly, Howard backed away, fear in his face. Perhaps because of the expression that Howard could see on *his* face. He went after him, grabbed Howard by the shirt with one hand and punched him in the mouth with the other. He brought his hand back to hit again.

Howard spat blood, and grabbed at his arm. At that precise moment Verret grabbed him from the other side, and they rushed him into the wall. He sank to his knees, clutching his face.

A fireball of light had exploded in his head, and memory came flooding back. Or rather, the last three months evaporated away, and when John Steed looked up he saw two men looming over him, and knew they must have attacked him. He exploded into action.

The two men weren't trying to fight him. They were backing away, desperately trying to block his blows while they screamed at him, "Basil, Basil, stop! Take it easy. Take it easy!"

He stopped dead, as his eyes went past the two men and he looked at himself in the full-length mirror. He knew that face...and it wasn't his. Two years ago...two years ago...Basil and Lola and the thought transfer machine of Professor Kellmar. And

now...now...he was back in the body of Basil.

He went up to the mirror, raised his hand to his face, and watched the apparition in the mirror raise its hand to its face. It was a face with pinkish eyes and fading black crescents underneath them and that damn toothbrush mustache.

Two frightened faces appeared behind him.

"Basil, Basil, we're sorry, man. Are you okay?"

Steed swallowed hard. He turned and managed an insouciant smile. "I apologize, gentlemen. I got a bit carried away, didn't I?"

"You can say that again," one of the men said with a smile. "Jesus, you're as good as Lola. Galaxy sure made a mistake, not letting you go along with them."

"Uh, yes, Galaxy did." Steed agreed. A cold stab of apprehension went through his heart. Lola. He remembered Lola. One of the most vicious women he'd ever met. And if *he* was in Basil's body again...where was Basil? And where was Emma Peel?

"You know something, that last little blow did something to the old brain pan. The last couple of hours are...a blur to me, gentlemen. Refresh my memory, will you?"

The two men he'd been fighting exchanged glances, but they weren't glances of derision. He'd won their respect with his fighting skill, and men who fought for any length of time could understand the old brain pan getting scrambled every now and then.

"You can fill me in over a pint," he said, easily, clapping the taller one on the shoulder.

What they told him, over their drinks, did not fill him with joy. Lola and three men had gone to a lonely estate to kidnap someone named Emma Peel. "Lola wanted to go on her own," the man with the knot on his forehead said, "She said she'd have no trouble taking her and really, Basil, we all knew that was true. But Galaxy wouldn't have it. She sent Munsey, Wilde and Finley along, too."

"And they're bringing her back here?" Steed said carefully.

The two men shrugged and exchanged glances. "I'm not sure on that point," the knotted one said. "They were talking like they were going to dispose of her."

"But that didn't make sense," the other one interjected. "What was it Galaxy said? She was going to be there for the capturing of her and in...disposing of her afterwards. That's what she said. But she said it funny, like when they were saying disposal they weren't really meaning *disposal* if you follow me.

"Ah, the English language," Steed said. "So open to misinterpretation, innuendo and mistake. Ironic, isn't it, that we all speak the same language and yet so rarely understand each other."

"Uh, yeah, right. But what the 'ell. What's the odds so long as you're happy, eh? I've had enough of this. Let's go play a little snooker, shall we?"

"Certainly."

He didn't want to play snooker with these gobs. He wanted to get out after Lola and Emma Peel and find out what was going on. But he couldn't. They'd made it clear that Galaxy was the only one who knew where this remote country house was. There was no sense rocketing around trying to find them. Mrs. Peel was just going to have to fend for herself.

Steed poured himself a generous splash of whiskey and watched, unseeing, as the man with the knot on his head concentrated on the snooker table.

The minutes crawled by, and turned into hours which crawled by even slower. Steed was drinking rather liberally by the end of it, and as a result was losing very badly at snooker. His popularity with the two chaps increased.

They heard the slam of a door, and Steed was at the door of the billiard room in a flash, followed closely by Verret and Howard.

Three men were standing in the hallway, looking rather grim. "Where's Lola?" demanded Steed.

"She had to stay," the one with the Roman haircut said, "and I need a drink."

They trooped into the living room and Drummond headed for the bar. Steed followed him and jerked him around. "Where's Lola?" he demanded.

Drummond downed his drink and poured another one. "I'll tell you just what happened," he said. "We got to the house, and we got this Mrs. Peel dame with no problem. She must have been drugged, or something, because she didn't put up any fight when we put her in the car.

Galaxy had Wilde and Finley stay behind, and I drove them almost halfway back to London. We came to another country house. Galaxy told me to stay with the car, and she and Lola dragged Mrs. Peel into the place.

Well, I was curious. I knew Galaxy would kill me if she found me, but I was careful. I got into the house, and I saw what they were doing. There was this huge machine, like something out of a horror movie. Lola was sitting in one chair, and Mrs. Peel in another, and Galaxy pressed some switches, and there were all these lights flashing, and then all of a sudden Lola went unconscious and Mrs. Peel stood up and started talking like Lola! And then....and then....Galaxy shot her."

Steed gripped him by the arm so hard he winced. "*Who* did Galaxy shoot?" he said hoarsely.

"I don't know!" Drummond cried. "She shot Lola, Lola's body, I mean, but I don't think Lola was in it. I think Lola was in Mrs. Peel's body. And that Lola, she wasn't best pleased, I can tell you. She said Galaxy should have left that pleasure to her!"

Steed's heart turned to ice, and there was a tremendous roaring in his ears. The glass in his hand shattered into millions of pieces and blood dripped unheeding down onto the floor.

"Where is she now?" he gritted.

"Well, I ran like hell back for the car. I don't know what they did with the body, but Mrs. Peel...I mean Lola-in-Mrs.-Peel's body, and Galaxy came back. I drove them back to that house, and Lola said she had to stay there, because that bridge tournament was going on all weekend long. She told me to tell you, Basil, that she'd be coming here for a visit on Monday when it wouldn't be so conspicuous. She said you weren't to worry about her."

It took all of his willpower for Steed to reach casually into his breast pocket, pull out a handkerchief, and wrap it around his hand, tsk tsking the while. "This house, where she's staying," he said casually. "What's the address?"

"Uh, 123 Gloster Lane, up Leicester way," Drummond said, "but why? What are you going to do?"

Steed grinned. It felt like a death's head grin to him but hopefully it looked lascivious to the rest of them. "This kind of thing always turns me on," he said, "and I don't think Lola should be alone tonight. I'm going to pay her a visit. We needn't tell Galaxy. Give me the keys to the car, Drummond."

Wordlessly, Drummond handed over the keys.

"Right, gentlemen." he said, smiling wolfishly. "Don't wait up."

Chapter 4

I.

Steed drove into the first petrol station he saw, skidding to a halt in front of the pumps with a screech of brakes. The attendant began filling the tank while he strode into the shop and bought a newspaper. November 6. November 6. And the last day he remembered was...when...back in August? Yes, August, late August...he'd taken Mrs. Peel to a steeplechase.

Steed threw a sheaf of pound notes at the clerk, ran back to the car and left the attendant gaping as he got back onto the road in a squeal of tires.

Three months of his life, gone. And when he'd been brought back to himself he was in the body of Basil the Butcher. He should stop the car. He should call Major Bee, find out the last time he'd been in contact with the Department. Find out if he and Mrs. Peel had been sent out on an assignment, and what it had been. That would be the wise thing to do. The responsible thing to do. But that was not what he was going to do. He was not going to stop until he got to 123 Gloster Lane, Leicester.

Steed pressed down on the accelerator and the grey Peugeot leaped forward and ate up the kilometers voraciously.

Mrs. Peel couldn't be dead. She couldn't.

Steed took his hands off the wheel and wiped the dampness off on his slacks. He blinked away the hot wetness in his eyes.

Mrs. Peel couldn't be dead. She had nine lives, like a cat. She could get herself out of jams as easily as he...and when she couldn't he was always there to rescue her.

Always.

But this time...he'd lost his memory somehow. She'd been in trouble, and he hadn't known he'd had to rescue her. Had she been waiting for him...confident that he'd be riding in on his white charger at any moment to save the day?

Steed turned on the radio, twisted the knob til he found a jazz station and turned the volume up as high as it would go. He needed it loud, loud enough to drive these thoughts out of his head. Mrs. Peel couldn't be dead.

But...if she *was* dead....

Steed gripped the wheel hard, so hard that the cuts in his right hand opened and started bleeding again.

Someone named Galaxy had killed her, not Lola. But it was Lola in Emma's body now, Lola who was alive. Lola who would go about prostituting her body. Using it to kill innocent people. To steal secrets. To betray her country. Worse than that. It was Lola who would see out of Emma's eyes, laugh out of Emma's lips. No. That would not happen. If Emma was dead, Lola was not going to live.

Steed pressed the accelerator hard down.

His anger was at a white hot pitch and he had to keep it there. It was that was keeping him sane right now. Anger and hatred.

Mrs. Peel *couldn't* be dead.

He'd stared death in the face many times. So had Emma. They'd always been able to escape. To win out in the end. They'd saved their own lives. They'd saved each other's lives. They'd *always* won out in the end.

Steed took his hands off the wheel and wiped them off on his slacks again. He blinked against the hotness in his eyes.

They were a team. They worked together as a team. If one needed help, the other one was right there to give that help. They could always count on each other....

Only he'd let her down this time. He hadn't been there for her. He hadn't even known he'd had to be there. She'd have been waiting for him, expecting him to be there, expecting him to *know* that she needed him. He always did. Had she stared her killer down? Confidently expecting him to break in at the last moment? Had she felt the bullets enter her heart? Had she had time to think....he didn't come?

Steed's hands clenched on the steering wheel as hard as he could, feeling in it the soft throat of Lola.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. Nerves jangling like wires in the wind indeed...

II.

123 Gloster Lane, Leicester.

Steed got out of the car and leaned against it, arms folded across his chest, assessing ways and means calmly. He was himself again. The core of white hot rage burned within him, undiminished.

It was a huge house, this - a central story, with a wing on either side. There were dozens of rooms in each wing. Even though it was a couple of hours before dawn, several of the rooms were still blazing with light. These bridge players...such a wild lot.

Well. Such a house would be teeming with servants. And if the guests in the house were awake, so would the servants be. Steed reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of twenty pound notes. Then he went up to the front door of the house and rang the doorbell.

He leaned against the door jamb, the pound notes protruding between his fingers. The door opened and a tall, portly butler stood there, his eyes on the notes in Steed's hand. "May I help you, sir?"

"The lovely Mrs. Emma Peel is playing bridge here this weekend," Steed said. "I'm an old friend, and I would dearly love to pay her a visit. What room is she in?"

The butler licked his lips, his eyes still on the forty pounds. "More than my job is worth, sir." he said hoarsely.

"Oh, I quite understand." Steed smiled charmingly. "But she knows me, I assure you. There are quite a lot of lights on in the house. Is she still chatting it up with her fellow bridge players?"

"I...I believe so, sir."

"Well then, that solves your problem. Just tell her...Basil is here, and wants to see her."

"Uh, yes sir." The butler twitched the notes out of his hand and turned away. "I shall return shortly, sir." He closed the door.

Steed remained leaning against the door jamb, his head tilted quizzically, his eyes closed. His heart was beating slowly, powerful, like a funeral drum. The butler returned and Steed smiled at him, whimsically.

"Mrs. Peel will see you in her room, sir." the butler said, po-faced. "She's in the west wing - the only guest staying in that wing, sir. If you will follow me."

The butler moved at a funeral pace, which suited Steed very well. The blood was roaring in his ears again. His belly was cold, but his heart was colder. He flexed the fingers of his cut hand, he'd need both hands for what he had to do....

The butler led him up to the second floor, and to a corner room at the far end of the wing. He knocked once on the door, lightly. Emma Peel opened the door wide.

It was her. It was Emma. Tall, slender, auburn hair perfectly coiffed. Chocolate brown eyes, patrician nose with its retrousse tip, high cheekbones, mobile mouth. White sweater outlining her perfect breasts. Black slacks outlining her perfect hips. She stared at him, and gave a slight smile. "Basil. Come in." She glanced at the butler. "Thank you, Jeeves."

Steed willed his legs to move and entered the room, jerkily. The woman in Emma's body closed the door. "What are you doing here?" she hissed.

Steed grabbed her around the throat and began to squeeze.

Lola seized one of his hands with both of hers, fingers seeking out pressure points. Using this leverage she ripped his hand from her throat, twisting his arm, causing him to arc away from her, and then she released one hand and used it to punch him in the face. He staggered back.

"Basil?" she gasped, holding up her hands, palms outward, in a calming motion. "*Basil?*"

"You don't seem pleased to see me, my dear." Steed said, wiping blood from his lip.

"You're the one who put your hands around my throat."

He smiled whimsically. "One look at you and I couldn't help myself."

"What are you doing here?" she asked again.

"I heard...what happened. To....Lola"

"Oh," she said. "Yes...it was a shock. I didn't expect Galaxy to take matters into her own hands. I feel terrible."

"Do you?" said John Steed.

"Of course I do! That wasn't supposed to happen!"

"Wasn't it?"

It was too much. Emma standing before him, lovely as ever. The same mannerisms. The same charm. And yet, not Emma. Lola. Emma was dead. Steed lunged for her again. No going for the throat this time. The arms. Imprison the arms and knock her out by slamming her against the wall - hard enough to break her neck.

Lola timed it perfectly, dropping down to her knees beneath his grasping arms, seizing his ankles and surging to her feet once more. Steed soared over her shoulders. He hit the floor and sprung up like a jack-in-the-box, facing her. He lifted his hands into boxing position and advanced slowly.

"What's your name?" Lola demanded. "Before we go on with this, tell me, what's your name."

"Who do you think I am?" Steed retorted.

"This morning, you didn't remember who you were."

Steed registered that, as with a belly blow, but said only "Well, now I do."

"Then the question is, who do you think I am?"

They stared at each other. Steed began to feel the first stirrings of hope. Could it be...? Simultaneously, as if a bell ending a round had rung, they dropped their arms. Steed turned, spied a chair and sat down in it. Lola backed up a few paces and sat down in another chair. They looked at each other warily.

"A month ago," Lola said, "John Steed and Emma Peel were assigned the task of tracking down the head of an assassination bureau. They heard that two agents from the Other Side, Basil and Lola, were going to be broken out of jail to work for this bureau. Now, do you remember any of that?"

"No. The last thing I remember is three months ago."

"Really? And what were you doing three months ago??"

Steed shook his head. "I'd much rather hear your story. Continue on."

"Two years ago, Basil and Lola attempted to take over the bodies of Steed and Emma using a machine designed by a Professor Kelmar. They failed, were captured and were sent to top security prisons. One machine was destroyed, a back-up still existed. It was believed, by a certain individual, that the head of this assassination bureau would have no problem in breaking Lola and Basil out of prison. So, this individual decided to be proactive. Are you with me so far?"

Steed wiped sweat from his forehead. "Keep going."

"Steed and Emma went to Basil and Lola, and proposed a deal. They would swap psyches, voluntarily this time. So when Basil and Lola were taken out of prison - it was actually Steed and Emma who were liberated."

Steed swallowed hard. "So Steed was in Basil's body, and Emma was in Lola's body. Then."

"That's right. The plan was for them to infiltrate the assassination bureau, and find out everything they could. Most important of all, they were to find out the name of the person in charge of the bureau. Also, they were to instigate things in such a way that they would be swapped back into their original bodies, so that they could continue on with the case as Steed and Emma."

"Very involved and convoluted and over-complicated plan," Steed said. "Typical of Major Bee."

"Ye-es..." said Emma Peel.

"So," she continued, "they broke Lola out first." She stared at him for long seconds, then gave a shrug as if to say 'no more cat-and-mouse'. *Me*. Emma Peel, in Lola's body. Then, a week ago, we went to break out Basil. John Steed, in Basil's body. Only something went wrong. A guard maced Steed-in-Basil's body, and threw him against the wall. End result, he lost his memory. He didn't know *who* he was. And that's where things stood this morning."

John Steed took a deep, shuddering breath. He blinked away a sudden hot wetness in his

eyes.

"So you're Emma Peel." he said hoarsely.

"That's right. The question is, who are you?"

"What do you *mean*, who am I?" He stood up, moved toward her. "Mrs. Peel, I'm me."

She was out of the chair in a flash, poised in a defensive posture. "You came here to kill me. Why?"

Steed stopped, backed up, sat back down. "A few hours ago, I was fighting with two men. Bouting, I suppose we must have been. I must have hit my head again. I knew I was John Steed, but the last thing I remembered happened three months ago. We went to a steeplechase, remember. You won a hundred pounds on Daylight."

Emma Peel's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"I played it well. Didn't let on. Got them to explain to me what was going on. They told me that ...Lola, three men, and a woman called Galaxy had left to kidnap Mrs. Peel. There was nothing I could do at that time. I didn't know where they were going. There was no way I could find out. All I could do was wait. Then, the three men returned. The American with the Roman haircut told the story. He said that they'd succeeded in kidnapping Mrs. Peel. He said that Lola, Mrs. Peel and Galaxy had gone into a house. He'd seen Lola and Mrs. Peel strapped to a machine. Lola went unconscious, Emma Peel woke up, and Galaxy killed Lola."

Steed spread his hands. "What was I supposed to think? I'll tell you what I thought. I thought that Lola was in your body and that you'd just been killed. That's what I thought."

"So you came here to kill Lola?"

Steed nodded.

Emma shook her head. "We *told* Major Bee that this plan was too convoluted."

"I need a drink," Steed said.

Emma picked up a decanter from the sideboard, and poured out two large glasses. She placed one of them on a small end table, and with her foot shoved it close to him.

"Still don't believe I'm me, Mrs. Peel?" he said, leaning forward to pick up the drink.

"I've never seen Steed with tears in his eyes before," Emma said quietly.

"You've never seen me think you were dead before. Something happened to the stiff upper lip, I can't deny it. I blame it on just a little too much liquor consumed earlier today."

This almost moved her, but Emma was nothing now if not cautious.

"I'm not sure. Basil-in-Steed's-body was under close supervision. But what if he decided he didn't like the deal anymore? What if he decided to break out? What if he somehow found out the address of the assassination bureau and paid it a visit. What if there were a third Kellmar machine and Basil knew about it, and what if Basil and Steed went to that machine, and now, you're not Steed, you're Basil. And you came here to kill me because you're broken up over Lola's death, and believe me responsible?"

"You've got a lot of what-if's there," Steed said.

"Impasse," said Emma Peel.

"Easily solved," said Steed. "Twitter."

"Twitter?"

"Twitter." Steed said, intently.

It rang a bell. Emma cast her mind back. "Bird impersonations aren't my strong suit," she said.

Steed snapped his fingers at her. "There, you see. Basil and Lola might know various incidents from our lives, but they can't know the exact words we spoke on any occasion. No one but us could know that."

Emma Peel nodded.

"All right. Let's see. One of our first cases. I was trapped in the sub-basement by a Cybernaut, and you came running in. What did you say?"

How could he ever forget? "The pen. Give it me."

"And I tossed it to you."

"And what did I tell you?"

"That it was a tracking device. And I told you to get rid of it. And what did you say?"

"'Don't worry, I will'. *Why* did you say that, by the way? Did you actually think I was going to hang on to it?"

"It wouldn't have surprised me. That was when I first knew you, remember. You sometimes preferred brute force to guile. But attaching the pen to the other cybernaut's tunic, that was a stroke of genius."

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Peel."

God, it was her, and she was alive. He so wanted to get up...to kiss her...to embrace her...to make love to her. But not in this body.

"Steed," she said, "It's almost dawn. You've got to get back to the house."

"Why? We've got the information we needed, surely. Galaxy is the head of the Assassination Bureau. And who was the traitor who brought you here this evening, so you could be kidnapped?"

"Eric Joddrell," Emma said. "The M.P."

"Well, then, that's enough. This is what I think we should do. Let's go get Basil. Take him to the machine, and swop our psyches. Then we destroy that damn machine so that it can never be used again. And then we tell Basil that Lola was killed by a woman named Galaxy, and let him take it from there."

Emma stared at him. He'd been through so much - hell, they'd both been through so much. And they did have enough information to break the Assassination Bureau.

"All right, Steed," she said. "Let's go."

She turned, and opened the door. Filling it, holding a very big gun, was Galaxy.

Chapter 5

I.

"How inopportune," observed Mrs. Emma Peel.

"Quite so, dear lady." said Galaxy. "Verret."

There was a movement behind Galaxy, and Verret sidestepped into view. He too carried a gun.

"Well, you might as well come in," Emma said, opening the door wide.

"Thank you," said Galaxy. "Sit down first, if you please."

Emma backed up and sat down in her chair. She crossed her legs, slipping her shoe half off one foot. There was still a bit of whisky in her glass. She drained it.

Galaxy entered, moving lightly as a ballerina on her massive underpinnings. There were no other chairs, only the bed.

Steed made as if to get up. "Forgive my manners, dear lady. Here, have this seat."

"Sit down, Mr. Steed."

Steed sat back down with a shrug at Emma Peel. He picked up his own glass, but there was no liquor left in it. He pouted down at it.

Verret entered the room, walking very carefully on a path between Emma and Steed, to take up a position with his back to the windows. Galaxy took center stage.

"So," said Galaxy. "So. Emma Peel and John Steed. What a diabolical plan you two had devised."

"I don't know about diabolical," Steed protested. "Convoluting and complicated, I grant you."

"It doesn't matter now," Galaxy snapped. "You've failed."

"What are you going to do with us," Emma asked, reaching for the decanter and filling her glass full of liquor again. She put the decanter back down on the table and took a genteel sip.

Galaxy smiled. "You won't be leaving this room, my dear. This man," she gestured at Steed, "has a lover's quarrel with you, and strangles you. Then, reacting in grief to what he has done, he commits suicide. A sordid story, and all too common these days."

Steed and Mrs. Peel glanced at each other. "All too common," they agreed.

"Right." Galaxy extended her gun hand just a little bit, making sure Steed knew it was aimed right at him. "Verret, you may do the honors."

Verret grinned. He tucked his gun into the waistband of his slacks, flexed his fingers, and headed for Mrs. Peel. Mrs. Peel flicked her half-off shoe at him, and as he batted it away she followed it up with her glass of liquor, hitting him in the head.

Simultaneously, Steed flung his own glass at Galaxy. She ducked out of the way, which allowed Steed time to get to his feet and grab away the gun. Galaxy brought her fist around in a hammer blow, with all her massive weight behind it. Steed dropped to all fours.

Emma Peel barked, "Hold it, Galaxy."

Galaxy turned, slowly. Verret was on the ground, as out cold as a mackerel, and Emma was holding his gun trained on Galaxy's massive form. "Sit down," she ordered.

As calm as a Buddha, or a woman with friends in high places, Galaxy sat down.

Steed remained on his knees, clutching his head. "This just hasn't been my day," he moaned.

"Steed, if you tell me you've lost your memory again I will shoot you myself!" Emma exclaimed.

Steed lowered his hands. His nose was bleeding again. "I *hate* this mustache. It's like a blood magnet." He wiped away the blood. He was sooo fed up with this day. "I want to go home, Mrs. Peel," he said, with calculated pitifulness. Emma picked up on it with a grin.

"And so you shall," she said. "Call the Major."

II.

John Steed unlocked the door to his flat, and stood aside for Mrs. Emma Peel to enter first. "I'll make us some coffee," she said.

Steed locked the door behind them, and then stretched out on his divan. It had been a long, sad day. They'd fetched Basil, they'd swapped psyches once again, and then they'd destroyed the machine. Then they'd told Basil what had happened to Lola. Emma had given him the deposition by Munsey - that it had been Galaxy who had killed Lola. They'd brought him back to the prison, to let Major Bee deal with fulfilling the terms of their agreement.

And now they were back in his apartment.

Emma sat down beside him, prompting him to sit up and accept the steaming hot cup of coffee she handed to him. He reached out with his free hand, and put it over hers.

"I didn't like this assignment, Mrs. Peel." he said. "I have a feeling if I remembered everything about it I'd like it even less."

"Oh, I don't know," Emma said, sipping coffee. "That morning when you'd revealed you'd lost your memory - for a whole week not knowing who you really were...I thought your reactions rather interesting. Rather...comforting, somehow."

"Comforting?"

"You fight the good fight, Steed," Emma told him, taking his coffee, and putting hers and his down on the coffee table. "You always have, and you always will."

"That's true," Steed admitted.

She came into his arms, and all was right with his world.

Do Not Forsake Me

John Steed stood alone in the middle of his flat, staring at nothing.

Emma Peel had just told him, in her low, lovely tones: “Always keep your bowler on in times of stress...and a watchful eye open for diabolical masterminds.” Then she’d kissed him...on the cheek.

She’d headed for the door without further ceremony. He’d called to her. “Emma,” he’d said. The first time he’d ever said her first name. She’d looked at him with her liquid brown eyes...and he couldn’t say what he’d wanted to say. “Thanks,” he’d said instead. She’d smiled a sad resigned smile and walked out. She’d walked out on him.

There was a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. He felt...bereft.

Steed crossed over to the window. He wasn’t quite sure why...to see her one last time? To see if she was going to look up to see *him* one last time? If she saw him looking down at her, would she return?

Steed looked down into the street, with a giant's eye view of a silver convertible. He watched as Emma’s lithe figure walked around to the passenger side, and a tall man, bowler hatted and carrying an umbrella, opened the door for her.

They had Him wearing a bowler hat, Steed thought, very coldly, even as his face creased in an incredulous grin. Whose idea of a clever joke was that?



Emma got into the car, and then she *did* glance up at him. Their eyes met. Briefly. The man in the bowler hat got into the driver’s seat and the car



accelerated down the street and out of sight.

Steed felt a spurt of anger. So that was the way of it, eh? This was how They wanted it to

end? Emma's husband returns from the grave and that's it? The dutiful wife quietly hangs up her pistol and brass knuckles and returns to *kinder, kuche and kirche*? And Emma was going along with this? He couldn't believe it.

Steed turned as the door opened. The young woman called Tara King stood there, posed as if she were modeling for him. Agent 69, he thought with another spurt of anger. The emotion didn't get as far as his face, for Steed was a marvelous actor. It wasn't this young woman's fault that They had decided to use her to replace Emma Peel.

Replace Emma....it couldn't be done.

But They were obviously going to try.

Two hours crawled by. Tara was excited to be working with the famous John Steed, and kept telling him so. She knew his every case by heart, it seemed. Every case...that he had handled with Dr. David Keel, Dr. Martin King, Venus Smith, Cathy Gale, or Emma Peel.

'The *famous* John Steed', Steed thought to himself. Don't you realize what that means, Tara King? Everyone knows me, on our side and amongst the Opposition. I'm too well known now. Mrs. Peel was too well known...so They said. So They'd retired her. For all that she was a talented amateur and not an agent at all. And yet she'd *let* them do it. And what was *he* to become? A *nanny* for a trainee agent?

Was this to be borne, Steed thought, as the girl prattled on. No...no, it was *not* to be borne. But...what was he going to do about it?

Finally the girl left. She'd worn a very sexy outfit and seemed disappointed that he did not give her a kiss as she made her exit, merely his most charming smile. She was pretty, she was attractive (the two weren't necessarily synonymous), she could hold her own in a fight, but she wasn't Emma Peel. And he wanted Emma Peel.

He...loved...Emma Peel.

Steed nodded to himself. Yes. He loved her. And he'd thought she'd loved him. He'd been *sure* she'd loved him.

Steed slipped out of his suit jacket and exchanged it for a black turtle neck sweater. Emma had always liked him in that. He applied a match to a pyramid of kindling in the fireplace. By the time he'd poured himself a glass of brandy and lit a cigar, the logs were well ablaze, and the flames danced merrily in their grate. Steed relaxed on the divan, swirling the brandy

gently, puffing at his cigar. He gazed into the heart of the fire, its warmth flowering over him, and he remembered....

The first day he'd met her. He'd been in his Bentley, following a couple of his agents chasing a fleeing villain down Palmerston Road, in the heart of London. The man -Johnny Dankworth - had knifed a third agent and was trying to make his escape with a piece of microfilm. He'd made the mistake of running right past Mrs. Peel with the knife still in his hand. She had grabbed his arm and used it as a fulcrum to ram him into the wall of the nearest building. Then she'd casually flipped him around and applied the coup de grace with graceful brutality. And *then*, she'd simply got into her car and driven away, leaving others to deal with the aftermath if they so desired.

He'd been impressed instantly. Any civilian acting with such poise and efficiency would have impressed him, to be sure, but a beautiful woman...that ability in a woman was just sooo sexy. He'd followed her - not because she was a woman but because he'd had to make sure she *was* a civilian. He'd followed her all the way to the village of Little Puddle, and then contrived things in such a way that she accidently ran into the back of his Bentley with her Lotus Elan.

She'd gotten out to confront him, and for a very few seconds there had been a look on her face of such incredulous joy...wiped away immediately and replaced with shattered disappointment when she'd gotten a good look at him. She'd thought he was someone else.

That was right, Steed remembered suddenly. The real Peter Peel *had* worn a bowler, that was right. And when he'd been behind Mrs. Peel at that point in time, for a second she *had* thought that he, Steed, might be him, Peter - for his plane had disappeared in the jungle of the Amazon just a month or so earlier and his body hadn't been found. She'd still had hope. Emma had loved the real Peter Peel very much.

Steed's hand tightened on his glass. How cruel then, for Them to choose *this* as the excuse for her to retire. The return of Peter Peel.

Steed sipped brandy, and forced himself to remain calm. To just...remember.

That day. Those few minutes. They'd talked. She'd introduced herself and he'd recognized her name immediately - as the first woman to head an engineering company, of course, but also as the wife of the missing test pilot Peter Peel. He'd decided then and there that she was indeed merely a civilian and that her dispatch of the villainous Dankworth had simply been fortuitous.

Then he'd returned to the Ministry to learn that the microfilm had *not* been found on Dankworth's body. Suspicion had blossomed anew. And a sort of cold rage. Not so much that a woman of Mrs. Peel's stature could be a traitor to her country, but that he could have misjudged her so badly.

He'd confronted her in her flat then, menacing her to tell him the truth. She hadn't been phased. She'd given him the Look, which was more effective than even Cathy Gale's pointed commentaries, and very calmly pointed out that there could be another person who could have made off with the microfilm. And indeed she'd been correct. Clemens, the Ministry man detailed to search Dankworth for the microfilm had taken it and done a bunk back to his real masters.

Hardly an auspicious beginning, Steed thought now, grinning ruefully. Which is why he'd held off on seeing her again, though he'd desperately wanted to. She was just the kind of woman he needed, professionally and personally, since his partner Cathy Gale had chosen to retire and go make her fortune in America, of all places. But that look that he'd caused on Emma Peel's face, the emotions *he'd* caused - joy turned to despair - had haunted him for quite some weeks.

And then she'd been handed to him. Fate had stepped in. She'd gone to West Berlin, on a sort of pilgrimage, he'd guessed, for Peter Peel had been stationed there just after the war. There she had become involved with Max Prendergast - a master criminal who was making a fortune out of the misery of refugees from Eastern Europe. His scruples had gone by the board. He'd been after Prendergast for years and here was his chance to catch the swine. He'd moved in. And Emma Peel had done exactly what he'd asked of her, and more. She'd proven to him that she'd be a more than capable replacement for Cathy Gale. She'd proven to herself that she enjoyed life on the edge. She'd agreed to become his partner.

Steed finished off his brandy. He glanced at the cut glass decanter, but decided against refilling the snifter. He felt like getting drunk, but he wasn't going to. He would have things to do later - as soon as he could think of them - and he was going to need a clear head.

Steed lay back on the divan, folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. He listened to the popping of the logs and the flaring of the flames and let the warmth wash over him. It felt good, lying there...

The figure of Father Christmas carried a bag over its shoulder. Oddly shaped boxes wrapped in bright paper - airplane shaped boxes? - protruded from its top. Boots crunched in the snow as the figure walked away. The head turned and looked over its shoulder, revealing the face to be that of Emma Peel. She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling with mischief, and then she

beckoned, and Steed followed her.

Steed grinned in his sleep. Christmas had always been a favorite time of his. That Christmas two years ago hadn't started out to be pleasurable, though...in fact he'd been in hell. A group of mind benders had been putting him through the wringer, and it had been all the worse since he'd suspected what they were doing to him but had had to submit to it anyway. He'd gone with Emma Peel to a Dickensian party at the home of Brandon Storey, where it had all come to a head. The weekend had not been so pleasurable for Emma, either - her friend Jeremy Wade had been killed there. By the end of the adventure they'd both saved each other's lives, and they'd both been emotionally drained.

On the way home, they'd stopped at a hotel. And there they'd made love for the first time. They'd spent an entire day there, in lazy, languorous love making, getting to know each other in the most intimate sense. They hadn't been *in* love, he didn't think, but certainly attracted to each other and in need of some comfort and pleasure after what they'd gone through.

When *had* he fallen in love with her, Steed wondered. Yes...at the end of the case of the Man-eater of Surrey Green. An extra-terrestrial, empathetic and psychotic plantlike alien had crash-landed in Surrey Green, and had been able to take over the minds of all the humans in a certain radius. He and Emma had gone to the mansion in which the alien was growing, along with the charmingly eccentric Dr. Sheldon. They were armed with a specially prepared tin of plant killer - which had to be poured directly into the root system of the plant - and defended with deaf-aids in their ears which blocked out the telepathic power of the evil alien.

But Emma's deaf-aid had come out during a fight, and for quite some minutes she'd been completely in the plant's control. He'd been trying to save the can of weed-killer, and she, in a glazed way, was trying to pour it out harmlessly on the ground. They'd fought. And then he'd managed to get the deaf-aid back in her ear. Sanity had returned immediately...and a sort of terrible knowledge of what had to be done. Within seconds she'd come up with the perfect plan. The plant had gotten control of her once...and knew her...and was hungry. Pour the weedkiller over her jacket...and then let the plant drag her away to...eat her. It would sup on the liquid first, and die.

He'd stared into her eyes at that moment and his heart had swelled with love even as he'd pulled the deaf-aid out of her ear again, and as her eyes glazed over with the return of the plant's control, planted his fist on her chin, knocking her unconscious. Then, his heart in his mouth, he'd poured the weedkiller over her. He, Sheldon and Sir Lyle Peterson had then taken refuge in a separate room. And they'd watched. And waited. Steed had had to grip the doorjamb with both hands to prevent himself from running forward when the tendrils of the plant slithered over Emma's unconscious body, and started to drag her slowly away.

He'd known...*known*, that Emma would be safe. As those tendrils closer to the plant's roots transferred the poison directly to its...well, heart, he supposed, that specially prepared weedkiller would take effect immediately. She *would* be safe.

And she was. And when she'd regained consciousness a second time she'd asked him the traditional question with an impish look in her eyes - "What happened?" Steed couldn't resist. Making bad puns was his only flaw, as Cathy Gale and Emma Peel had told him on many an occasion [well, Mrs. Gale wouldn't have called it his *only* flaw]. "Didn't you know? I'm a herbicidal maniac." She'd groaned at him, and he'd helped her to his feet and she'd leaned against him, allowing him to comfort her and give her strength.

And when had *she* fallen in love with him?

They'd meshed together from the very beginning. It had been as if they'd been psychically linked - she always seemed to know what he was thinking, and vice versa. They'd spent hours and hours together, training. She'd already had a black belt in karate, and was a tournament level fencer. He'd taught her street fighting. 'Dirty fighting' as Cathy Gale had called it, but as Steed had said time and time again, don't ever fight fair - because the other chap certainly won't. They'd bouted often, learning each other's tendencies and abilities - their speed and reflexes, strengths and weaknesses.

He'd never seen her out of countenance, even when he was unrolling her from a Shabazz carpet during that Pinter's Department Store business. Her pride had been hurt on that occasion - she'd been a bit too overconfident - but she always learned from her mistakes. And he'd begun to learn that he could tell when she was in trouble, and that she could tell when *he* was in trouble. Although they so often were in trouble...Steed chuckled softly...

She'd gotten a legacy, from some Uncle. An Uncle who turned out not to exist. She'd been lured to a house by *someone*, with diabolical intent. He'd moved heaven and earth to get there on that occasion. And when he'd arrived ready to save the day, she calmly stepped out of a door after having rescued herself, and smiled at him. "Where's your shining armor?" she'd asked. And he'd been hurt by that, and showed it. And she'd realized that she'd hurt him, and that he'd intended to *be* her knight in shining armor, and at that point, her regard for him had turned to love.

That adventure hadn't effected her much, mentally. The villain of the piece had been a Professor Keller, someone she'd worked with but never had special regard for, and he had certainly never had regard for her. It had been *stressful* at the time, but with Emma stress was often like water off a duck's back.

Not so last year, when Max Prendergast had escaped from prison, bent on revenging himself on Emma Peel. For Prendergast had been deeply in love with Emma, and she'd used that love to catch him in a trap and turn him over to the authorities in West Berlin.

That adventure had been eerily similar to the Keller incident. They'd both lured Emma to a remote house, intent on terrorizing her before killing her. But Emma didn't terrorize easily.

This time, though, she had been affected mentally. She'd been ..what was the right emotion...somewhat guilt-ridden in how she'd tricked Prendergast into missing his get-away plane - using her 'feminine' wiles on him, not realizing that he'd actually been in love with her - or what passed for love in such a psychotic individual. And then for him to come back, his love turned to insane hatred...it had rattled her. This time he'd arrived a little bit earlier to save the day, with Emma down on her knees, one hand grasping the knife-hand of Max Prendergast, whose insanity-driven strength had taken her by surprise. She probably would have been able to dispatch him, but he'd saved her the effort this time.

He'd given Prendergast a taste of his own medicine. Starting up the music he'd been playing, *Meine Liebe, Meine Rose*, and then prancing at him with the gigantic Joker card that had served as a sort of revolving door. Prendergast had been frozen with horror, and then Steed had dropped the Joker on him and that had been the end of that.

"Steed."

His heart had lurched when she'd called his name that time. She'd been so relieved, so delighted to see him. She hadn't wanted to deal with the aftermath of this adventure alone. And they'd walked out into a sunshiny day, found a secluded glade, and made love out in the fresh air, to the serenade of bird song, and doubtless the amazement of various cute woodland creatures. That had been a special time, Steed thought.

He'd never told her he'd loved her. He should have, he supposed...but she *knew* he loved her, as he knew she loved him. There were a lot of things they didn't have to tell each other...perhaps this was one of the things they should have...

She'd left him.

Steed wrapped his arms around himself and concentrated on the warmth and the comforting sounds of the fire. The sound of airplane engines filled the air, and he found himself running through billowing clouds, chasing after a small, twin-engine plane. A leather-capped, goggle-eyed pilot with a gleaming white silk scarf streaming in the air revved the engines and

increased the throttle, so that the plane bounced slightly up and down on the tarmac. It turned and headed towards Steed. Steed ducked under the wing and turned to look at the pilot, who was looking back at him, grinning. Steed would recognize those lips and teeth anywhere. It was Mrs. Peel. She beckoned to him. Steed sprinted forward, but the plane accelerated and lifted into the air. Steed ground to a halt and put his hands on his hips. She was trying to tell him something, but what?

Steed opened his eyes wide. He sat up. Mrs. Peel *was* trying to tell him something. But what?

He stood up, sucking in deep breaths. Calming himself.

Okay, Mrs. Peel was trying to tell him something. Twice he'd been dozing, and he'd seen her beckoning him. She wanted him to follow her. Well, perhaps if he'd get into a proper sleep, she'd be able to get through more clearly. He'd give it a try.

Steed strode into his bedroom, pulling off his clothes. He stepped into the shower and took a brisk five-minute pelting of soothing hot spray, then toweled himself dry and pulled on his silk pajamas...a gift from Mrs. Peel. He slid into bed, stretched to his fullest, pulling all the kinks out of his muscles and enjoying the almost sensuous feel of it, and then he closed his eyes and waited for sleep to come.

He could hear the ticking of the clock. Tick tock. Tick tock. It was very loud. Very soothing. Time, being sliced into slivers. They'd run out of time...he and Mrs. Peel. They'd gone their autonomous way for two years...and then the Ministry had decided to step in. "Mrs. Peel, you're too well known...and you're an amateur. Time Steed had a partner who was actually a professional agent. Time Steed had aa Mother, to report to."

Mrs. Peel had taken it well. "All good things must come to an end," she'd quoted at him, in their meeting with Major Bee and the wheelchair-bound Mother.

She'd *wanted* to retire. He could see that at the time. Because she didn't like people telling her what to do and she would have taken a stand if she'd wanted to. She would have given Major B *and* Mother one of her patented Looks and they would have folded their tents and crept quietly away. But she hadn't. And he'd accepted that.

But he hadn't expected *this*, the Ministry's method of ensuring her retirement. Bringing a Peter Peel back into her life, making a front page story of it, so that all the world, friend and foe, would know that she was now nothing more than a wife.

And leaving him.

Had she had anything to do with that? Surely not. She would have told him if she'd been in on the planning of it, but when he'd last seen her a couple of days ago she'd been wondering if the Ministry was going to do anything at all! And now all of a sudden Peter Peel's return was front page news, and she'd walked out on him...and in his dreams she was beckoning him to follow her. Was it him - dreaming what he wanted to believe, or was it her, trying to tell him something?

Tick tock. Tick tock.

The subject of marriage had never been broached. They both danced with death each day of their lives and Steed was not the marrying kind in any event. Mrs. Peel had never intended to get married again, either. They hadn't wanted to live together, either. Arranging trysts in various locations had always been so much more fun.

Steed lifted the lid on a bright red Baby Grand piano, propped it up, flipped his tails out of the way and sat down to play. Figures danced by - men in tuxedos and women in evening gowns. Wearing masks - cats and dogs, tigers and lions, pirates and kings and queens.

As each figure swept past him they lifted up their mask, to reveal another mask underneath. Steed picked up the pace and the figures swirled past faster and faster. Soon it was as if they were caught in a vast wind and were blown off their feet and into the air, as if they'd been illusions without sustenance and no weight to them. Finally there was no one left. No one. He was alone again.

Steed played a couple of final chords, and then sat in silence. A cat, a large, lithe, auburn cat with melting eyes, walked into the room. It walked with finicky steps across the floor and came to a halt at his feet, looking up at him. Then its muscles bunched and it leapt gracefully onto his lap. It reached up and put both its paws on his chest, and its small, sleek, beautiful head craned up at him. It...she...purred at him. She began to knead his chest with her paws.

Steed stared into those chocolate eyes. "Happy now?" he asked.

In response the cat's claws came out, just a little bit, like little needles in his chest.

"Alright, alright," Steed said, laughing. "I know you're not. I'm not happy either."

The cat straightened up a bit further, and butted his face with her cold nose. Then she went back to kneading his chest with her paws. She started to purr.

"So what's to be done, Emma? What's to be done?"

She stopped kneading his chest and curled up in his lap. She lifted one paw and batted at a newspaper on top of the piano. Steed reached out and picked it up. It wasn't a newspaper...it was a card. A birthday card. In French.

Steed stared at it for several seconds, and then began to smile. Mrs. Peel's birthday was coming up. And for the last two years he'd taken her to Paris for her birthday. They'd always stayed at the same pensionne. And it would seem...they would stay there again *this* year.

The cat put her paws on his chest again, and butted his face with her nose. Steed cupped her face in his hands and bestowed a kiss on that cold nose.

“We'll always have Paris, eh, Mrs. Peel?”

She meowed at him. Then she began to fade away, until only her eyes and mouth were visible. And then she was gone.

Steed rolled over and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. But there was a smile on his lips. They'd always have Paris.

Who's Who?

In which Patrick Macnee meets Emma Peel

Patrick Macnee sat in his dressing room, having a spot of tea. He pulled a bottle of scotch from a drawer and added a dollop to the cup, then sipped and savored. "Ah."

He sat there with his eyes closed. It was only ten a.m., but it had already been a long day - he'd arrived at six in the morning. They'd been filming since seven. Today was supposed to have been outdoor scenes, but a violent thunderstorm was raging so they were filming all of the transmigration scenes instead.

A smile played around Macnee's lips. Transmigration indeed. The plots their writers came up with. Of course this was going to be an extremely fun episode to film - he and Diana Rigg were already laughing about it. Steed and Emma actually kissing on screen! Should give their fans quite a thrill.

A knock on his door. "Five minutes, Mr. Macnee."

Patrick finished off his tea, picked up a sticky bun and munched on it as he made his way back to the set. Arnold Diamond, who played Dr. Krelmar was off to one side, practicing his German accent, Patrick surmised, Freddie Jones who played Basil was practicing slouching his shoulders in front of a mirror, and Patricia Haines who played Lola had pulled her wig off and was looking at it disconsolately. "Have you ever seen such a mole's nest?" she asked Patrick as he came up to her.

"Well, you *are* a Russian, my dear," Patrick told her unsympathetically. She popped her bubble gum at him.

Patrick walked over to 'the machine.' He shook his head. The designer had certainly spared no expense with this thing. There were light bulbs everywhere, which would go off when "Dr. Krelmar" flicked his various switches.

"Alright, Patrick."

Patrick stood to one side as the director blocked out the scene, where Freddie and Pat dragged his body over to the machine and placed it in the chair. Not *his* body of course. Patrick didn't believe in doing his own fighting and he didn't believe in having his body dragged around, either.

Once his stunt man had finished all that dragging, however, Patrick took his place in the chair, eyes closed. He waited patiently while someone lowered the visor over his head, or the vi-zor as Arnold said with relish, and continued to sit patiently, eyes closed, while the others gave their lines.

"When I give the signal, you will start counting," Diamond/Krelmar said. He started flicking switches. There were no sounds, of course - thank goodness the designers hadn't tried to put that into the machine - but Patrick could "see" the lights flashing through his closed eyelids. "Now!" he heard Arnold say. Freddie started to count. Patrick waited patiently while Freddie got up to ten. Then, suddenly, he felt the ground literally shake and a great ball of lightning in his head. He felt as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt.



Consciousness returned with a jerk. Patrick lifted his head and looked around blurrily. His head hurt, his shoulders ached, there was something wrong with his arms, and there was something wrong with the scene in front of him. Diana was walking along the row of stilts, and on the other side of the row of stilts he could see Patricia, poised to strike. But there was no director, no light men, no lights, no cameraman - and there was no bloody camera!

Patrick was nothing if not a trooper. He knew the line and he said it. "Mrs. Peel! Look out!"

Diana ducked, and a stilt went sliding over her head and crashing through a window.

Patrick looked on incredulously as a man came into view. Not just any man....a man who looked just ...like... him. Not only a man who looked just like him but who was dressed exactly like him.

Diana looked up at the man, her face a study, and exclaimed "Steed!" Then her eyes widened in shock as the man raised his arm and brought the umbrella down viciously. There should have been a director there to yell cut, and then Action again for Diana to just fall over - but that wasn't the way it worked. Patrick watched in utter horror as the umbrella handle actually caught her across the head - he actually heard the *thwack*, and she crumpled bonelessly to the floor.

Patricia came up to him and slapped him. She actually slapped him! "Very foolish, Mr. Steed."

Patrick stared up at her. It was Patricia alright - Patricia with the awful blonde wig, on top of the beautiful face - but her eyes were very cold.

"I felt that. That was my face you were bruising." Those were *his* lines, but they were being said by the man who looked exactly like him, and then that man was in front of him, looking very big and ugly. My god, he had no idea he could look so menacing. Patricia looked nervous, but he just snapped his fingers at her. "Go and help the doctor." Then the man turned and looked down at him.

Patrick stared up at him. He was looking into a mirror and the doppelganger had walked out of it.

"I admire your tailor, old man. Very good taste."

Patrick gaped at him. They were the right lines...and the man in front of him certainly looked like him....and he hadn't studied Freddie Jones' lines and what the hell was he supposed to say? The trooper came to the fore once more.

"More than I can say for yours." Then he leaned back quickly, and the man who looked like him did indeed whip that umbrella round very close to his face. "Uh, uh. *Your* face, remember."

The man with his face spun away.

Patrick's mouth felt as dry as the inside of a parrot's cage. The backs of his eyeballs hurt. But he wasn't drunk. He *wasn't* drunk. He'd had one tot of whiskey in his tea. *One*. This could not be happening. Patrick turned to look behind him...and caught his eyes in the mirror there. His eyes, looking out of Freddie Jones' face.

Was he having some kind of bizarre homosexual fantasy? No, not possible. In twenty years of walking on stage in the presence of the handsomest of men and the most beautiful of women, it was only the women who had ever caused any stirrings in him. And if he *were* having a homosexual fantasy it would not be his fantasy to exist in the body of Freddie Jones, and that was bloody certain.

Vaguely he became aware of voices and noises from the next room. The room with the Machine in it. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to picture it in his mind - how they'd been supposed to film it. The three of them...Arnold, Freddie and Patricia....Krelmar, Steed and Lola, had Diana....Emma Peel - in the chair, and Patricia had taken her chair and they had lowered those damn vi-zor and Arnold was flicking the switches and the lights would be

flashing ridiculously.

Diana would open her eyes. But was it Diana? The man who was supposed to be Arnold Diamond but who must really have been Dr. Krelmar would turn off the machine...click, click, would go those damn switches....while heBasil/Steedslipped back the bonds and freed the woman's arms.

And it should be him, him who would lean forward and say, "You okay?" and be there while Diana went "Mmmmm," and leaned forward and kissed him! and then say, incredibly, "Great, baby." Basil/Steed would said fatuously, "That's my Lola." She would pushed him away and walked over to where Emma/Lola was now sitting and say "What do we do with...me?"

"What's good for the goose is good for the ...help me, Doctor."



And, indeed, within a very few minutes the two men appeared, carrying Patricia Haines' body over to the post to which they had chained Patrick. He felt them unchaining one of his hands but he was absolutely in no position to do anything about it even if Lola/Emma had not been standing there with a gun in her hand as they did it. And in any even he couldn't take his eyes off Diana. Lola/Emma. She was so beautiful. She looked exactly like Diana!

Was he really looking at the real Emma Peel? The real Emma Peel who was now inhabited by a vicious enemy agent. She didn't take her eyes off him, but the expression in those eyes, the smug smile...that was not, could not be Diana looking at him.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Patrick murmured, but they ignored him.

"We make a very handsome couple," Lola said, gazing at them.

"Come on, lover, we've got a full program ahead." Steed/Basil brushed past her briskly and bent down to stare at Patrick. "If you shout, don't count on anyone hearing you."

"Uh, uh," Emma/Lola said. She turned back and plucked the package of gum from Lola/Emma's pocket, and flourished it at Steed/Basil. "Old habits die hard."



Patrick felt the chains move....Emma must have regained consciousness.

"Steed! That woman! That's not me!"

Patrick swore inwardly, but he had to do it. He turned his head and said at his most insouciant, "Save your breath, Mrs. Peel. That's not me, either."

Act Two

The two double agents with their faces...their bodies...smiled at them, and then walked out of the building.

Silence. Dr. Kelmar came for a second to stare at them, and then there was a knock at the back door. "You're not leaving us," Emma called to him. Kelmar turned and smiled at her. "You will see me again, Mrs. Peel. Sooner or later."

Patrick sat in silence, and Mrs. Peel didn't speak either. All of a sudden they began to hear noises emanating from the other room - the sound of machinery being dismantled, probably by a couple of men who had come especially for the purpose. It was bloody unfair, Patrick thought. There was no reason for that machine to move - he hadn't understood it when he'd first read the script and he didn't understand it now. It had just been done to provide the show with an extra ten minutes while he and Mrs. Peel had tried to find out where Dr. Kelmar was.

The men went out with the machine, and Dr. Kelmar followed them without another glance at the two captives.

They sat for a long few seconds in silence. Patrick desperately tried to get some saliva into his mouth, and then said, "They've gone."

"Why did they leave you behind?"

Had dialog been written for Freddie and Patricia at this point in the script? Well, if they had any dialog he didn't know what it was. What was he supposed to say? What was he supposed to bloody do to get out of this and back where he belonged?

"They....they couldn't take me along, Mrs. Peel. I am John Steed."

"You!" her scorn would have cut him to the quick if he hadn't known he looked like a fortyish-odd man with graying temples and a bushy mustache.

"That machine you saw them dismantling. It did something to us. They've switched our psyches. We are in their bodies, and they are in ours."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're trying to gaslight me."

"Gaslight?"

"*Gaslight*. Charles Boyer. Ingrid Bergman."

"Oh, yes, your movies. But I assure you...."

"Don't even talk to me, please. I'm trying to think."

Patrick was quite pleased to just sit there and say nothing. His head was still pounding, and perhaps if he just went to sleep for a few minutes he'd wake up and all this would turn out to be some crazy dream.

But what if it wasn't a dream? What if he was really here, in ...*Avengers* land. Whether it had really happened or he'd gone round the twist and only thought it happened...what if he was really here, in Avenger land? He was in deep kimshi, that was what!

He felt rather than saw her moving behind him, looking this way and that, trying to find a way out. Still she was ignoring him. The silence was now starting to get on his nerves. Was that really Emma Peel behind him? A woman as strong and self-confident and as intelligent as the woman Diana played? God, if only it weren't for that horrible wig....

Patrick tried to force some saliva into his mouth and said, "So you imagine I'm part of some fiendish plot, Mrs. Peel."

"I know Steed." Patricia ...no, he'd better think of her as Emma, said. Her voice was pitched differently but her style of delivery was all Diana Rigg's. "And you are *not* he." And she turned to look at him and saw her face in the mirror so conveniently placed. Her eyes took in her own face as well as Freddie's face.

"And to quote, or nearly, you are not she, either. Transmigration, interchange, switch, swap,

call it what you will."

She turned her head away. "No," she said definitely, "It's some trick."

"Well, I'll say one thing. You've certainly retained your stubborn streak."

She didn't respond.

How to convince her that he was....Steed? Hell, how to convince her that he was an actor named Patrick Macnee and didn't belong here at all? What had been Freddie's lines at this point? He'd glanced over the entire script very briefly, but it wasn't his job to learn everybody's lines, just the people whom he was doing scenes with. What was Freddie supposed to say at this point? Suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, it came to him.

"Do you remember that drive from Mont Blanc to Dijon?"

"Turn right, you said."

"And you turned left."

"Well if I hadn't..."

"We'd have missed that delightful chateau...gourmet's paradise."



"Except for the claret."

"The chablis, Mrs. Peel. It was chablis."

Emma turned and looked at him via the mirror again. Well, that bit of dialog had gone over well; he wondered how he'd known it. But she was still looking at him skeptically.

"You still doubtful?" Patrick said.

Patricia smiled what in Diana would have been her inimitable smile. "Well, I know who *I* am. And if you are Steed, I wonder what *we* are up to."

We're busy killing a helluva lot of people, Patrick said to himself. Jesus, they're probably



dying even as we're sitting here. And then Patrick blinked a few times as he ran through his mind the scenes that had been written for him and Diana while their bodies were supposed to be inhabited by Basil and Lola.

"We've got to get out of here!" he almost shouted.

"I do so agree."

Patrick cast his mind back, not to his old World War II days but what he'd done time and time again in four years of the *Avengers*. "I can ease my wrist out of this handcuff," he said at last. "Old magician's trick." Emma held the chain up to make it easier for him. He tried to pull his wrist out, murmuring, while his face set in pain, "Merely a question of contracting the wrist."

But all he was doing was rubbing his wrist raw.

"Mind if I have a go?" came Emma's voice.

"Do."

Right. Let's see what *she* could do without a stuntwoman and a specially weakened pole!



He heard her kick away the stool and adjust her feet. "Spot of kung fu might do the trick." She said. Then there was nothing but silence for a couple of seconds, and then he heard her shout, "Hai" and all of a sudden there was a crunching noise and a two inch section of the pole around which they were chained actually hit him in the back of the ankle.

"Going down," said Emma Peel, and they both knelt down in unison, slipped the chains through the jagged hole and stood up once again.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Peel." Patrick told her. He looked down at her feet. She was shod in high-heels. What was this - every woman spy wore steel-reinforced high-heeled shoes?

"There are some tools over there." said Emma, nodding towards a work desk some feet away. They headed over in that direction. Patrick saw a long, stiff wire. Now, that could be a

picklock. that he could do. He grinned at Emma.

"Mrs. Peel, I think we have our key. But it will be easier face to face."

She nodded at him. Then turned, and held up her hands. Good god...she actually expected him to...automatically, he held up his hands and they grasped hers.

"One, two." he said. He felt the full pressure of her back against his as he leaned over, pulling her up, and she actually flipped over his shoulders and landed in front of her, bouncing in her landing like a gymnast completing a vault on a pommel horse.

Thank god he was looking into the face of Patricia Haines and not Diana Rigg. Not that he didn't find Patricia unattractive - except for that awful wig - but if it had been Diana's face in front of him and the knowledge that he was actually looking at Emma Peel... he felt a tug on his hands as Emma reached for the piece of wire and handed it to him.

Well, okay, Patrick, pick the lock, he told himself. Jesus Christ, he was supposed to be a top notch agent himself - he had to show her he had some skills.

Patrick leaned over her wrist, probing the handcuff lock with the piece of wire.

"This is going to be a challenge, Steed," she said.

"Nonsense." Patrick felt it necessary to defend his skills. "I pick a lock every day of the week."

"I didn't mean that. I meant, we're handicapped. First thing we've got to do is get our own bodies back."

"True. But unfortunately, when the doctor left, he took his fiendish machine with him." Patrick didn't resist as Emma took the picklock out of his hand and went to work on the lock on her own. She spoke as she worked.

"True, and unfortunately, we've got to find him. And the only way to find him is to find the other me."

Patrick nodded. He knew his lines for this. What corny dialog they had written for this scene. But he had to say it.

"Yes. If you were you, where would you head?"

"Back to my apartment."

And with that she handed him the last of the chains and headed for the door. Patrick glared at the chain incredulously. Then shrugged.

"Bright girl."

He followed her to the door, then paused and gestured.

"After you."

She stared at him and nodded. "That's better."

Patrick glanced at her, puzzled. Just what did sheoh, yes, as Basil inhabiting his body he'd walked out of a door in front of her - something he - that was to say, Steed - never did. And he'd called her Emma. And all she'd gotten was a puzzled look on her face. Why hadn't she realized right then and there that there was something rotten in the state of Denmark? And when 'he'd' driven her back to the stilt shop in a car that was not his Bentley - hadn't that given rise to some suspicion? Not for their tv selves of course but if this was the 'real world' and she was a 'real' secret agent, shouldn't that have occurred to her?



The Bentley was still outside the building. Of course. It took a special knack to start it and the fellow Basil hadn't known how to do it.

True enough, Emma climbed into the passenger's seat and looked at him searchingly.

"I suppose you know how to start her."

"Still don't believe I'm me, Mrs. Peel?" said Patrick, even while at that very moment he was wracking his brain to remember how to start it. On the show, the damn thing didn't run, he just went through the motions and a couple of prop men pushed it out of the frame. Nevertheless, he'd just go through the motions and see what happened. What choice did he have?

He started the car with a flourish, released the brake, and to his utter shock and Emma's fond "You're you," he drove off.

ACT Three

Well, he'd got the Bentley going. That was all very well and proper but now where the hell was he supposed to drive to? Steed's apartment didn't exist except on a sound stage...where did he live anyway....3 Stable Mews he seemed to remember....they had written it out once in the show's 'Bible'...and he'd better be able to find it or else Mrs. Peel would begin to think that he was an impostor after all.

As he drove, Patrick began to give serious thought to the fact that he was going insane. For he seemed to know exactly where he was going - what turns to take, even downshifting in advance of the turns as if knowing when they were coming up.

But more than that, what was he to do. In the script, he and Emma Peel drove up to his apartment, where they were spotted by bad Basil and arrested by Tulip and brought to Major Bs office, thus leaving the field free for bad Basil and lethal Lola to kill about thirteen men in cold blood. Surely if he used a bit more circumspection in approaching the house they could get in, catch the villains by surprise, and end it before any of that massacre took place.

But what if that was the wrong thing to do? What if he had to play this entire script out, do everything just like it was in the script so that at the end of it he'd regain his mind? That was probably the more likely scenario. He hoped.

But what if he was wrong? What if they did everything as had happened in the script? This time it wasn't a stuntman doing his work for him, or even a real trained agent doing the work. It was him. An actor. Whew. An actor playing the role of his life. Patrick swallowed hard. He wished he could stop the Bentley so that he could throw up, but instead kept on driving to the rear of the building which he somehow knew housed his apartment. He pulled on the emergency brake.



could be at my place."

"How will you find out?" she asked.

Facing Emma, knowing that eyes above were looking at them, he said, "They

What a silly question that was. Who'd written that inane line?

"Soon check up. There's a call box round the corner."

Patrick got out of the Bentley, trotted round the corner, and lo and behold there *was* a call box. He fished some coins out of his pocket and shoved them into the slot. Now, what was his phone number? Slowly he closed his eyes and lowered his head against the call-box wall..once, twice....the numbers popped into his head and he dialed them. He let the phone ring several times.

When he returned to the Bentley Mrs. Peel had gotten out and was looking up and down the street. "No answer," he told her. "Let's go in."

The back door to the building was locked, and he had no key of course, but he punched in the security code which let them in. He could feel Mrs. Peel relax still more beside him - only he....that was to say, John Steed, would know that security code.

They took the stairs up to the fifth floor, slowly. Patrick opened the door, peered out. My, my, and his apartment occupied this entire floor? He went to the door of his apartment and cocked his head. What was he listening for, he wondered? He could hear nothing.

Feeling like a traitor, he told Mrs. Peel, "All clear." He reached up to press the button on the top of the door, and it swung open. Feeling like even more of a traitor, he gestured for Emma to enter. What if this is where the script changed? What if they had already decided to take up permanent residence and started firing on sight?

But they came in quietly, all the way into the apartment, and just as quietly bad Basil and lethal Lola came up behind them. Basil was holding a gun.

"We have trespassers." he said coldly.

"Burglars." agreed the woman in Mrs. Peel's body.

"And it is the Englishman's inviolable right to defend his home."

Patrick forced himself to speak steadily. "You know, you won't use that."

"Oh?" said Basil with exaggerated surprise.

"And fill *yourself* full of holes?"

Before Basil could answer Tulip kicked in the door. Why did he have to kick it down, some small part of Patrick's psyche wanted to know. But Tulip entered followed by four men in white trench coats.

"All right, get them." barked Tulip, gesturing towards the unfamiliar agents. "You all right, Steed?"

Patrick started to answer automatically, "Well, I'm..." but stopped when Basil shot him a dirty look.

"I'm fine." said Basil, glaring at Patrick. Then he turned back to Tulip. "Thanks."



"We'll take care of them." assured Tulip.

Mrs. Peel, ever poised, lifted up her arm, and Patrick followed suit. He flinched only slightly as the cold metal of the handcuff ratcheted around his wrist.

Oh, for quick cuts in real life, Patrick thought to himself as he and Mrs. Peel were driven toward HQ. This interminable waiting in the car as they drove along, stared at with impassive faces by four men wearing trench coats, it was enough to drive him mad if he weren't mad already. And it would make horrible viewing for the watchers at home. Would they be watching this scene, he wondered? Or would they get impatient and start changing channels?

The car ride finished, they were brought up in an elevator to the office of Major B, and shoved down onto a rather comfortable white leather sofa. Major B entered. He stared at them.

Oh, for quick cuts, Patrick yearned again. None of this dialog had been written....what was he supposed to say? Well, he'd sit quiet. Mrs. Peel was the professional - let her deal with him!

"What are your names?" Major B asked.

Patrick blinked. "John Steed."

"Emma Peel."

Major B barked with laughter. "What the hell are you playing at?"

"It's really us, Major," said Emma Peel. "The Russians.....it must have been the Russians - have perfected a thought transfer device. They've used it on us. Swapped our psyches. Ask us any questions you like - we can prove who we are."

"For the last time, what are your names? The truth, now."

Patrick rubbed his cheek. "John Steed."

Emma responded in her own imitable style. God Patricia had Diana's shtick down well. Except...it wasn't a shtick. "Mrs. Peel. Emma Peel."

"Sir, madam."



Major B seemed to have reached the end of his patience very quickly.

"As enemy agents I respect your reticence in disclosing your identities. But what can be the purpose of this ridiculous charade? Oh, come along now, be reasonable. All this nonsense about swapping psyches, really. I know Steed. Played cricket with him, at

Lords."

"The last match, you dropped two easy catches." Patrick pointed out.

Major B looked disconcerted. What a good actor Campbell Singer was. "Well, you've got it all at your fingertips. Every minute detail. And I expect you, madam, could tell me the name of my barber."

"I might, except you're wearing a toupee."

Campbell flushed and brought a hand up to his head very briefly. "Yes, they've got you briefed, haven't they? Very well briefed. What a cunning lot you are. Well, it won't help you. I'm head of intelligence. Do you take me for a perfect idiot?"

"No one's perfect."

Patrick had to bite his lip. God, Patricia had Diana's delivery spot on. Or the real Emma Peel had Diana's delivery spot on. Or something.

Major B pressed a button on his desk, and then walked toward the door. Tulip opened it briskly. "Major."

"We'll talk outside." said Major B, and the two men exited the room.

Patrick sighed. "One thing is certain. They don't believe us." Still less would anyone believe that he wasn't Basil or John Steed but just a poor unfortunate actor who apparently was having a nervous breakdown. Patrick got up, pulling Emma with him.

"Well, let's be fair." Emma said, fairly. "Would you?"

"Well, unless we can get rid of these, and quick," and he held up their handcuffed arms, "our floral network will end as a barren garden."

He used to have a solid gold toothpick. At least Steed had had one. What episode had that been in? Not that that would do any good. In the script it had worked but in real life solid gold was too soft and a toothpick would bend like butter.

Patrick followed as Emma led the way to the windows and they looked down at the streets below. "No other way out." Emma said.

But Freddie and Patricia had escaped, Patrick remembered. How had they done it? Oh, of course. "I know, this might help." Patrick said. He hurried to B's desk and pressed a button and a drawer slid open. So much nicer than the recalcitrant prop in the real desk on the set.

Patrick picked up the gun and twirled it...and to his surprise twirled it expertly. "Standard equipment." he told Emma. "For an emergency."

"And this is definitely an emergency."

The door suddenly opened and Major B, foolish man, stood half inside the door looking out at Tulip. "Alright Tulip, the moment you hear from Poppy let me know." Emma and Patrick hurried up behind him as he closed the door and turned to see the white leather couch empty of its occupants. Before he could react Patrick had hit him over the head with the butt of the gun.

Patrick stared down at his victim, appalled. He hadn't killed the poor man, had he? But Emma had no such qualms and had already pulled him down and began hunting for the key in Major B's coat pocket. Soon they had themselves unlocked and were walking calmly through the deserted corridors of Headquarters, into the lift and down to the ground floor. Once out on the street Mrs. Peel calmly hailed a taxi and gave the driver his address.

As the taxi driver drove towards 3 Stable Mews in the unsettling way of cabbies everywhere, Patrick closed his eyes and tried to get a grip. But all he could see were images of him and Diana, playing the scenes that had been written for them. Not the killing scenes but the love scenes....the kisses....the fondling....the other scenes that the audience were supposed to have believed were going on in the bedroom and probably were in this strange reality. Scenes that he had been looking forward to all week and which he was not getting to enjoy. Patrick raised a hand and pinched the bridge of his nose and could not subdue a soft moan of anguish.

"Steed," asked Emma, concernedly. "Are you alright?"

Patrick turned to look at her. Even staring out of Patricia Haines' face he saw the concern of Diana...of Emma Peel. He forced a smile. "Of course."

I wonder, Patrick thought as he sat back, his shoulder warm against hers, their knees but a couple of inches apart, what Steed and Mrs. Peel's relationship *is* really like? Does it follow the plot of all of our stories....

"We're here." Emma interrupted his musings.

Patrick paid the driver and then they headed round to the back of the building, and in very carefully, very quietly, through the back door of his apartment. He knew what he was going to find, of course, and he knew the reaction Freddie was supposed to give.

He walked in and plucked the horrid striped towel off the bar and looked at it...moved further into the room and saw real bottles of wine nestling together on one of his overstuffed chairs. Incredibly, he felt actual anger at the mess the two impostor agents had made of his pristine home.

"Been having a ball." said Emma behind him.

Patrick moved over to the chair and picked up one of the bottles. "The last of my '47. And not even chilled." He tossed the bottle back on the chair.

"Now Steed, don't get irate."

"*Irate?!!*" Patrick turned to her, and surprisingly he *did* feel irate. His eye caught the prop box of cigars and he moved over to them and the ashtray beside it. "My cigars. Been smoking my cigars! And he's bitten...*bitten* the end off." He held out one of the stubs to Emma. "Bitten."

Emma was having a hard time containing her amusement, and Patrick thought that that was a joy to see. Even coming out of the wrong face it was a joy to see. "Now, calm down." she told him soothingly.

"What ...what sort of a fiend are we dealing with?" Patrick asked her. "The man who would bite the end off a cigar is capable of anything."

Oh, and then there was that other comedy relief. Best go through with it. He brushed past her, saying, "My best bowler's still here. That's one thing." He brushed off the bowler, placed it on his head, and tapped it. It slipped down over his eyes. He heard a soft giggle from Emma. Feigning irritation, Patrick stalked away.

Emma moved over to the side of the room, and saw a small metal container half full of flowers. She picked it up and turned towards him, her face ashen. "Steed."

Patrick had gone toward his utility room, and he had seen what was in there, and when he turned to look at Mrs. Peel his face was just as ashen as hers and he felt sick to his stomach. How many dead men were in there? Dead men - not actors playing corpses but real, dead men. Men whose last sight had been of a man and woman they'd trusted implicitly pointing a gun at them. He had to swallow down the bile in his throat. His voice was very tight as he said, "I know." and nodded toward the carnage.

This was his fault. Their deaths were on his head. He should have done something about this earlier - caught Basil and Lola earlier, driven them out to Krelmar's house and ended this lunacy once and for all. But it hadn't been in the script...but then, he'd never really followed the script, did he? Ad-Liebling all the time, playing off Diana....and producers - they never followed scripts - if they did Hamlet would always be fat, the fat prince of Denmark....but...the show must go on.

"They've got half the network." Patrick choked.

"Call the major," Emma said decisively.

Patrick swallowed down more bile. "Useless, he knows my voice. He wouldn't believe...me."

"Then we've got to locate Krelmar."

"And ourselves." Patrick added.

"I've a shrewd idea where 'they' are." Emma commented. She picked up the phone and dialed. It rang twice, and then over the receiver Patrick thrilled to hear Diana's voice as she said, "Emma Peel."

"It's me." Emma whispered at him.

Patrick knew that. He could hear Diana's voice, with the common accent of Lola saying, "Hello. Hullooo?" and then she hung up.

Emma stared at the flowers in the silver arranging bowl. "Who is next on their list?"

How in hell was he supposed to know that? Was there some kind of arcane herbological lore he was supposed to know at this point? But he said, "I'd say, Bluebell."

"Can you reach him?"

"I doubt if he'll listen, but I can try." Patrick took up the phone. He had no idea what number to dial, and no thoughts came to him. He dialed his own number, the number of his flat, and it rang busily. Suddenly he thought in horror...what if someone who calls himself Patrick Macnee answers the phone? What if he sounds exactly like me. I'll go screaming up the walls. Fortunately, the phone rang and rang. "No reply." He put the phone down and said, "We'd better head for your apartment. Come on."

He held the front door open for her and Mrs. Peel went out into the corridor and stopped dead, and Patrick stopped beside her. Tulip was standing in the hallway. How could he have forgotten that Tulip would be there? "Tulip, old plant," he said, feebly. And Tulip started reaching for a gun and Patrick remembered that now Tulip had orders to shoot to kill. Acting faster than he would have believed possible Patrick grabbed Mrs. Peel and flung her back into the safety of the apartment, locking the door behind him.

Mrs. Peel rebounded off the strategically placed chair in front of the door and looked at Patrick with an expression of unspoken thanks on her face. "Slight misunderstanding," he told her. "Come on!"

As they ran out the back way, they heard shots - Tulip shooting out the lock on the door. They jolted to a halt as they found that someone had locked the security door that led to the outside. It was not Patrick but Emma who automatically raised her foot and kicked the door open. They rounded the corner of the building and incredibly Tulip was behind them. They clambered into the Bentley and roared off and Emma told Patrick that Tulip had climbed in to his car and was gaining fast.

Once again Patrick seemed to know, subconsciously, what he was doing. And the beautiful old Bentley that never had to do more than roll into and out of shots was purring like a muted lion and rocketing down the road like nobody's business. Patrick put the pedal to the medal and turned down road after road, with Tulip's car getting increasingly far behind. Until finally he turned off into a culvert and Tulip's car roared past without hesitation.

Although they hadn't been doing anything more than riding in the car, both Patrick and Emma let out their breaths and felt as if they'd been running a marathon.

"Lost him." Emma commented.

ACT Four

"Well," said Patrick, "There's no point in heading for your place. They'll have men posted there."

Emma nodded. "It's the doctor we want. If he's got the machine our other halves will head for him sooner or later."

Patrick stared at her intently. "Unless they favor the present arrangement."

Emma nodded and then suddenly her eyes widened as the full impact sank in. "Unless they what?"

Patrick smiled wanly. "Well, think of the advantages."

Emma didn't have to think long. "Then they'll destroy the machine as soon as possible!"

And I'll be trapped in Freddie Jones' body for the rest of my life? Patrick pounded a fist into the palm of his hand. "We've got to find Krelmar. And quickly."

"I doubt if he's in the phone book," Emma pointed out in her charming way.

Patrick settled down to restart the Bentley. "We'd better find out." Suddenly, before he could move, a blazing ball of pain suddenly exploded in his forehead. He clutched at his head with both hands, trying to keep it from exploding into fragments.

"What's wrong?" Emma demanded.

Patrick could barely speak. "I don't know. Headache. Feels like migraine."

"That's not like you."

Patrick squeezed his hands together and somehow molded his skull back into his proper shape. The sharp pain faded into dullness as he glanced up at her. "I don't happen to be me, remember?" Wasn't there - he'd put some pills in his pocket, in what seemed like an eternity ago. He reached into his breast pocket and brought out a vial of pills. How stupid! How stupid of him to have forgotten this.

"Dr. V. Krelmar." he read aloud.

Emma snatched it out of his hand. "The Manor House, Hambledon."

Quickly she opened the bottle and gave him one of the pills, which he swallowed without benefit of water.

As he drove toward Hambledon, Patrick thought furiously. Something was happening. He was beginning to lose his grip on the script, and starting to say the lines from his subconscious or something. He was starting to forget what was supposed to be happening. That couldn't be right. Was he being subsumed into this role now...losing not only his memory but his very consciousness, his soul? The palms of his hands were cold and there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead. Emma, noticing this, brought out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. He directed a thankful smile at her.

What was going to next. Think, Patrick, think! They'd get to the Manor House, they'd walk in, the machine would be there. And then they'd see Diana....no....Emma Peel's body drive up in a car and get out and she would run into the building...yes, yes, that was it. Foolish of him to be so frightened - that sudden attack of migraine had just driven the lines out of his head for a few minutes. That was all.

They walked into the building, cautiously. No sign of Dr. Krelmar or the two men who had

dismantled the machine.

They walked into a very sophisticatedly set up room, with lots of equipment around the sides of it, and the transmigration machine in pride of place. "There it is," commented Emma.

"All in one piece," Patrick said, relieved. He stared at the machine in awe. The machine on the set at Pineview had been makeshift, a prop, with colored lights and all that, but somehow *this* machine seemed solidier, more real, more capable of actually ripping open someone's head socially and taking out their souls.

"How's it work?"

"How indeed." said Patrick, coldly. He'd been unconscious when the thing had been used on him, after all. How did she expect him to know that?

The sound of a car engine caused them both to turn their heads and they scurried to a far window and peered out. Patrick's heart lurched as he saw the woman whom he knew as Diana Rigg, dressed in the 'Emmapeeler' catsuit that she was making so famous, jump out of a car and come running toward the building. God she was beautiful. But evil inside, unless he could do something about it.

"How nice to see you," Patrick murmured to the woman in Patricia's body.

"Wonder what I'm doing here," Emma said with a touch of humor.

Patrick matched her. "Whatever the reasons, you're very obliging."

Patrick followed behind Emma as she headed for the door to the room. This was her business now. Emma opened the door fully and they stood behind it. The lethal Lola walked in all unsuspecting. Emma pushed the door to and brought a karate chop down on the neck of her unsuspecting body snatcher with a certain elan.

Patrick stared down at Diana's unmoving body. But there was no time to try to think things through. "Time you were yourself again." he commented. Emma and he lifted her body and placed her in the chair. Patrick took her face gently between his hands and held it steady while Emma lowered the visor. Then Emma got into the other chair, and lowered her visor.

Patrick stood staring at the machine. Switches, switches. Well, they were all flicked down. He flicked them all up. A powerful humming noise came from the machine and lights began to skitter from one side to the other, but he had no earthly idea how to proceed.

"Well?" Emma demanded anxiously.

Patrick felt like sinking his hands into his hair and pulling that hair out by the roots. He couldn't think. "I'll check next door and see if there's some instructions," he told her.



This was it, he said to himself as he forced himself to enter the next room and walk straight to the desk there. He knew that Dr. Krelmar was in the room, he knew that Krelmar was going to knock him out with the butt of a gun. Please god he wouldn't hit too hard - his head had already taken enough knocks as it was.

So intent was Patrick in looking at the papers on the desk and waiting for the blow that he didn't even feel it when it came.

How long was he out before he regained consciousness? No way of knowing. It was entirely unfair. He felt like he had the mother of all hangovers and yet he hadn't even had a drink in what seemed like an eternity. Why was he lying on the floor in this room?

Patrick got up very, very slowly. He brought the bottle of pills out of his pocket and with reckless abandon took three of them. Then he very slowly entered the room with the machine.

Emma Peel...it had to be the real Emma Peel, stood before him. She was smiling with Diana's incandescent smile and she was poised and confident and beautiful as he gazed at her. "It's all right, it's me." she told him, as if speaking to a spooked horse. "I got Krelmar to switch me back."

"Oh, yes?" Patrick said. He inched forward. He didn't want to have to play this scene. But he had to. If his life depended on him playing all the scenes in this script, than play them he must.

"Oh now look, Steed, it's really me." Emma Peel told him, holding out her hands placatingly. Was he really moving forward that menacingly? "No, Steed, don't force me to..."

"Force you to what?" he asked, and brought up his hand in a karate chop.

She blocked it effortlessly, and he felt the smooth power of her muscles as she twisted his arm up behind him.

"And if you want further proof..." she said, and then she bent down to whisper in his ear....oh god, what was wrong with his ears. He couldn't hear what she was saying! But she released him and he straightened up and said, "Oh, Mrs. Peel," just as he'd seen Freddie rehearse it one day.

She grinned at him impishly.

"Well, at least I'm back to normal."

Patrick stared at her. "Yes, but what about me?"

She shook her head sorrowfully. Well, at least she didn't find Freddie Jones attractive either!

Patrick licked his lips. "You're going to have to bring ...me...here."

Emma nodded.

Patrick reached for her arm as she started to turn away, and she looked into his eyes. Did he see his...Patrick's....eyes staring out at her from this face? "Be careful, Mrs. Peel," Patrick said. She grinned at him, and that grin filled him with confidence. She could handle it.

While he was waiting for her to return, Patrick scouted around. He found where she'd stashed the unconscious, trussed up form of Dr. Krelmar. He found a stash of liquor and he treated himself to a much needed tot.

Then he checked his watch. Soon, now, Tulip would be rolling up in his car, and he had a scene to play for Tulip. What was it? Oh, yes. Patrick glanced over at the still form of Lola...the real Lola, small and still and safely strapped to her chair. He approached her and lifted up the visor. She was beginning to regain consciousness.

She blinked up at him, and he smiled at her.

"How's it feel to be back home?"

Lola stared at him incredulously, as she realized that she was not looking at Basil but Steed - or who should have been Steed, in Basil's body. Her face convulsed in fury and she pulled desperately at the restraining straps.

"Don't hurt yourself, my dear." Patrick told her, with a certain sense of self-satisfaction. "I must say I don't care for that platinum blonde look of yours. Not to my taste. Nor is your perfume.."

Lola's foot lashed out and caught him just below the groin. Patrick bounced away, swearing, and came to rest with both hands on the wheeled divan. "That hurt *him* more than it did me." he told her viciously.

At that precise second Tulip slammed open the door and bustled through the doorway, waving his gun. Patrick ducked down behind the divan and shoved it forward desperately.



He caught Tulip unawares, and by spinning the divan forced the other man to run headfirst into a wall, where he stopped, turned, and sank down in a heap back on the divan.

Hah! Hah! He'd knocked out a dangerous adversary without half trying! Who needed a stuntman then, eh? "Does that solve your problem?" he asked the unconscious form of Tulip.

He heard the sound of Emma's car and quickly rolled the unconscious form of Tulip out of sight. Then he followed Emma's example and hid behind the door that led into the machine room. But he left the door only slightly ajar.

He could hear voices from the next room....Diana's and ...his, saying something. Then, all of a sudden, the door smashed open and hit him in the nose. He slammed it shut and grabbed at his nose as he saw Diana trading karate chops with the bad Basil.

"Look out for that machine!" he called suddenly as their bodies went careening toward it. He'd have to help her, but how. Patrick danced around them, seeking an opening, when suddenly Basil turned towards him with a swinging fist.

"Look out Basil!" came Lola's voice.

Patrick's view was entirely taken up by the viciously drawn back lips and teeth of his adversary, so he didn't see Mrs. Peel turn and spin the visor around to hide Lola's face.

A fist caught him in the belly, another glanced off his chin as he desperately tried to fight back. Why was Mrs. Peel just strolling around the sidelines, watching them? Couldn't she that this lunatic was bent on killing him?

Finally Mrs. Peel took a hand. Or rather, arm. As Basil brought back his right arm to punch him once more, Emma grabbed it and held it. "Thank you," Patrick told her, and swung as hard as he could.

The pain he felt in his knuckles was as nothing compared to the pain he felt at looking down at his unconscious body.

The sound of yet another car engine smote their ears - they both knew who it must be. Patrick locked the door and they dragged his body over and up into the machine. Then

Patrick went over, released Lola from the visor, and lifted her out of the chair and onto his shoulder. "Can you work it?" he asked Emma Peel as she started flicking switches with an air of authority.



"I think so." she told him.

Patrick smiled at her. The rush of affection he felt at that moment for her - for the real Emma Peel, was almost unbearable. Of course she could. When Krelmar had switched her back she'd probably watching every move, and of course *she'd* only have to see it once.



Patrick dumped Lola's body unceremoniously on top of Krelmar's, then returned and sat down in his chair. Emma strapped him in, and lowered the visor.

"Right. Start counting... now."

Patrick started counting. This was it. This was *it*. He'd end up in his own body now, and he'd end up with Mrs. Peel, and even if he was trapped in this bizarre world he would be...safe.

"One, two, three, four..." as he counted he began to feel heat on the top of his head, a sudden, vacuumy feeling inside his brain as if his entire soul were being sucked out of him....and then he heard himself saying "Nine, ten, eleven," and he opened his eyes.

Diana Rigg was standing in front of him, an expression of concern on her face. Above her were the blazing hot klieg lights, behind her he saw the extras in their white trench coats and beyond them he saw the cameras and the klieg lights and the director.

He was back. He was back in the real world.

"Got to finish the scene," Patrick told himself, as he stood up, turned, and lifted the red and blue dice off the machine and tossed them up and down playfully. Diana followed him, playing up to the thought that something had gone wrong.

"Steed, Mrs. Peel. Not too late?" demanded Major B.

"Almost too early." Patrick said, and grinned at Diana. And she grinned back.

"Cut, print." yelled the director.

Patrick was on auto pilot as they finished the scene. Campbell Singer as Major B said, "Cunning pair, these two. Tried to pretend they were you." And he and Diana exchanged glances and then turned back to him, saying, "Us." and once again the director said, "Cut, print."

"Alright, everybody," he said seconds later. "That's enough for today. See you all for final shots tomorrow."

Patrick and Diana winked at Freddie and Patricia and walked off the set. When they were alone in the hallway leading to their dressing rooms Diana turned to him. "Patrick, today was wonderful."

Patrick blinked at her.

"Those kisses we had...they almost made me wish I wasn't a happily married woman." And then she put a finger on his lips, and hurried on into her own dressing room.

Patrick gaped after her. Had they shot all of his kissing scenes *today*? *How* had they shot all of his kissing scenes today - when he hadn't been there to do any kissing???? *Who* had been there - in *his* body, to do the kissing?

Patrick staggered into his dressing room, flopped into his chair, pinched the bridge of his nose and moaned softly. All that kissing...and what did he have to show for it? Nothing. A splitting headache without benefit of booze. All the kissing that had been going on all day long on both sides of...wherever...and he'd been involved in *none* of it. There was a hell...this was it.

Patrick sighed, reached into the drawer and took out his bottle of scotch. He took a swig straight out of the bottle. After all, he deserved *something*.



DESIDERATUM



White Christmas

A story in two chapters

Chapter 1

The sun shone white in a grey sky, and on the black road winding through the cold countryside, a forest green Bentley crept at only slightly more than a snail-like pace. The driver of the open car, John Steed, wore a camel-hair coat and a top hat, and wrapped up snugly in furs in the passenger's seat was Emma Peel.

John Steed ached in every bone of his body, from both physical and mental exhaustion. It had been an unforgettable Christmas Eve. He'd accompanied Emma Peel to a weekend party held at the home of newspaper publisher Brandon Storey, and while there had come under intense mental attack by three powerful psychics trying to force him to reveal secrets, gleaned through his position as one of England's top agents. With the aid of Emma Peel he had defeated his enemies. The aid...Steed smiled. Emma had saved his life. At the very end, he'd been knocked unconscious and was at the mercy of the villains. Emma had taken out two of them, giving him the time he needed to regain consciousness and assist her in defeating the third.

And now it was Christmas, and they were leaving that nightmare house behind and driving into the cold, clean air of an English winter.

Steed reached behind him, his face not betraying the effort it cost him to make that movement, and his hand came into view again carrying a long, sturdy twig, to the end of which was affixed a sprig of mistletoe. He held it above Emma's head. She glanced up at the twig, her lovely face framed within the white fur of her winter hood, and then she did something that shocked him. She lifted smiling lips to his.

He hadn't expected it.

They'd worked together for four months, on six assignments. He'd flirted with her to start with, of course. Despite the fact that she'd have none of it, he'd persevered, for no other reason than that flirting with women was as natural to him as breathing. But the more they'd worked together, perfecting their teamwork during the deadly adventures they had survived, the more he had felt drawn to her.

He had found himself no longer wanting to flirt - he wanted to have a deeper relationship. But he had not dared to reveal his new feelings. She was but six months widowed...she had

already made her feelings clear and she was not the sort of woman who pretended no interest simply in order to egg a chap on.

Mrs. Peel broke the kiss first. "Car!" she yelled.

Steed turned and corrected the Bentley's drift simultaneously, and a silver Vauxhall honked its way past them, while its driver made an extremely rude gesture. Steed couldn't blame him.

"Marvelous peripheral vision, Mrs. Peel," he commented.

"A good thing, too," she replied calmly.

Emma Peel lifted the mistletoe twig from her lap and deposited it in the back seat of the Bentley. Then she drew her furs closer around her and gazed straight ahead. She had been as surprised as Steed by her action.

Steed drove on, his face a study in concentration. He increased the speed of the Bentley, but not by much. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the sheen of perspiration on his forehead, under the brim of his tophat. She knew the stress Steed had been under these last few days...she knew how he must be feeling now.

"Steed," she said, "You are in no shape for the long drive back to London. We're about to pass through a village. Why don't we see if they have an inn or a hotel of some kind?"

Steed blinked. "What a good idea," he said, eyes on the road, nodding.

Emma glanced at him. He'd said the kind of words she expected, but he hadn't glanced at her while he'd said them, with that flirtatious grin on his face. He seemed very uncomfortable. *She* was very uncomfortable.

Emma rested her oval chin in her hand. She'd always been attracted to Steed. From day one. He was intelligent, with a good sense of humor. He respected her abilities. He was in lovely shape, he was handsome, and he was charming. Too charming, she had decided, with his never ending flirting. That meant shallowness. Love 'em and leave 'em, as the Americans said. That was not what she wanted in a relationship, no matter how attracted she was to the man in question.

But this latest case had revealed a new side. His vulnerability, and his courage in handling what must have been a terrifying experience for him, at least at the beginning. Could her feelings have changed due to the maternal instinct, her desire to comfort him now that he had

revealed this vulnerability? Not at all, she thought with an inner smile. She had no maternal instincts. She had a nurturing instinct, but that wasn't the same thing.

Steed didn't need nurturing. The case was over, and they'd been victorious. Despite the fact that he was obviously tired he was clearly not changed in any way. He was still Steed. She'd seen another facet of him, that was all. A facet that, combined with all of his other qualities, had now changed her mind.

Emma Peel massaged her forehead. She was being very analytical here. Was that a good sign or a bad sign? She laughed out loud.

"What's so funny," Steed asked.

Emma grinned at him. Steed stared at her, and their eyes locked. After several seconds Steed brought his attention back to the road. Ahead he saw the sign that would lead them off the main road into the village of Upper Heyford. Steed took the exit.

Steed had no illusions at his ability to charm a woman into a mutually rewarding brief encounter. He was very good at it. He treated them all like ladies and they never had any cause to complain. But Mrs. Peel expected more from a chap. If it hadn't been for that kiss, he would have dismissed her offer that they stop for the day as a simple kindness, and not thought anymore of it. But that kiss changed things. She'd changed... He'd have to be careful now, not make any false steps. He'd have to wait for her to make the first move.

He drove very slowly down the Main Street of the village, and as they passed the local pub it indeed did have a sign out front declaiming, Rooms for hire.

Steed turned into the parking lot. He set the Bentley's parking break with a flourish, which caused a muscle in his back to scream irritably, and then he turned and looked at Mrs. Peel. "Well, Mrs. Peel?" he asked, calmly.

"A single room, I think, Steed." Emma said, equally as calm.

Steed's eyes lit up. "Jolly good." He put a hand on the windscreen preparatory to levering himself out of the seat, when Mrs. Peel said, "Wait - we need to visit a chemist's."

Steed grinned at her with his old insouciance. "Not to worry, Mrs. Peel. I had myself fixed years ago. No desire to have the patter of little hooves about the place, don't you know?"

Emma smiled.

She remained by the Bentley while Steed went in and registered. He returned with the key and came to a stop, smiling. She bent and picked up her suitcase, he picked up his - a muscle in his cheek twitched - and they walked down the pavement to their room. Steed twisted the key in the lock and flung it open. "After you, Mrs. Peel."

The room was large, but cozy, with overstuffed furniture and a big bed. Sunlight pressed up against the curtains - it was only noon, after all. They placed their suitcases on the tables provided and Steed opened his and removed his shaving kit. "Bags I go first," he said, and went into the bathroom.

Steed ran some water into the sink and splashed it on his face. Cold and bracing. But it wasn't bracing him enough. He was so exhausted. Even the eminent prospect of making love to Emma Peel wasn't doing anything for him. Damn, damn, damn!

Steed sighed, and brushed his teeth, and came back into the room. Mrs. Peel was unpacking clothes into a huge wardrobe.

"Mrs. Peel."

She turned, concerned at the tone of his voice.

"My dear, I'm terribly sorry. But I have to sleep."

"Of course, Steed!" Emma caressed his arm with quick concern. She'd known he was exhausted. Well, so was she, come to that, physically if not mentally. "Tumble yourself into bed and get comfortable. I..." and she threw a sensible nightgown over her shoulder, "will change in private."

Moving more like an old man than he cared to acknowledge, Steed undressed and slipped into his pajamas. He climbed into the big, soft bed that embraced him like a lover, and sighed with pleasure.

Emma came out of the bathroom, smoothing the folds of white linen around her. "How charming you look, my dear," said Steed.

"Thank you, Steed."

Emma pulled back her side of the covers and slipped in. She scooted over with remarkable grace to Steed's side, looked down into his eyes for a second, and then very quickly bestowed a kiss. Then she scooted down and put an arm around his chest and laid her head on his

shoulder. "Is this comfortable?"

"Extremely." Steed raised his arm and draped it around her shoulders as well. Her body felt so warm beneath his...and she was here, in bed with him. And...there was always tonight. Content, Steed fell asleep, and very quickly, so did Emma Peel.

Chapter 2

The drone in his ears was loud, so loud that it filled his ears and pounded into his brain. He clenched his hands over his ears and fought to open his eyes. Through slitted lids he saw the curved sides of the plane, with webbing and strapping hanging everywhere. That was it. That was right. He was on a plane. The noise was the drone of the engines. They were flying over the Channel to France, that was it.

He couldn't move - the parachute on his back was too heavy. Was it strapped too tightly, cutting off the circulation in his arms and legs? He couldn't feel them at all. Well, he *could* feel them - they felt like hell...like they were on fire. He couldn't jump like this, they'd have to abort the mission.

Too late. The huge door in the side of the plane swung open, and great grasping fingertips of wind clawed at him, caught him up, lifted him up bodily and carried him out of the plane. He twisted to see his two mates, Varney and Ketch, and they were far back behind him, their chutes already popped, reaching for him, yelling his name.

Desperately he reached up and pulled the ripcord. The resulting jerk against his arms made him scream in pain. It felt as if the chute were trying to rip his arms right off. He looked up and the silk was streaming out...but it wasn't opening, wasn't billowing into that beautiful crescent that represented the difference between life and death. He was going to fall to the ground like an arrow...a human missile, and the impact was not going to be pleasant.

He twisted around and arced his body so that his entire body was perpendicular to the ground, spreading out his arms and legs to create the maximum wind resistance. All was not lost yet, as one of his Aunties used to say at appropriate moments. Never give up the ship. While there's life there's hope. He narrowed his gaze at the ground - it was still too far away for him to see anything properly....but he'd have to find a clump of trees, a stack of hay, a big pile of mud....*something* he could land in to break the shock of his fall.

He tilted up an arm which sent him rushing eastwards. The wind's fingers continued to claw at him, ripping at his clothing, the clothing of a French peasant, leaching tears from his eyes.

You can't beat me, wind. You'll hold me up till I see somewhere I want to go...

There - that clump of trees there...next to that farmhouse. That was the place. He drew his arms and legs slightly closer to his body, and arrowed down toward his target. It was going to be rough, but if he crashed into the tops of the branches they'd brake his fall...so that the ground wouldn't break him.

What an ugly color green was. And how ugly were those trees. No...no...trees were his friend. They were going to save his life. Here they came....

It was like riding through a roller coaster that had broken loose from its track, or through the tunnel of a wave, or a green hell. Branches scratched at him, caught at his clothing, and the roar in his ears...was that the sound of his forward motion or was that the sound of his screaming?

Silence. No movement. Only pain. Pain and...swaying. He couldn't open his eyes...sticky...they were sticky...blood? Open them...just open them, dammit.... He opened slitted lids and looked up. There was a canopy of trees up there...and the crumpled remains of his 'chute, and the guy-lines of his chute. He looked down...far, far away, was the ground. He was swinging like a pendulum underneath a bloody great tree.

Stamp, stamp, stamp. What the hell was that? Jackboots...jackboots. Germans...the Germans were coming and they were going to see him unless he did something bloody quickly. He glanced up desperately, grabbed at the guylines with his useless arms...his shoulders screamed in agony...he couldn't haul himself up in time.

"Achtung!" came a voice from down below. He looked down, at a squad of six Germans, all staring up at him, all carrying rifles. All lifting their rifles to their shoulders. He clutched at his chest, scrabbled at the quick-release, and as the bullets whined over his head he dropped straight down. Time it right, he told himself, time it right, hit, drop and roll...didn't have quite the same ring to it when you were falling straight down from a tree instead of angling in with a parachute above you.

The earth rose up to met him and crunched him in the face.

Roll over, he told himself. Can't. Can't move. Every bone in my body is bloody well broken. Doesn't matter, he told himself. Roll over. Face it. Face them when they shoot you. There was a knife in his boot...get it. He drew up, very slowly, his knees under him, and slipped his hands back...as if he were scrabbling to lever himself to his feet...he pulled out the knife with his right hand...he rose to his knees...his back screaming every inch of the

way...he looked up into the faces of hundreds of Germans staring down at him, over the sights of their rifles.

He took a deep breath and lifted his chin...and the knife.

It wasn't the noise of their rifles that greeted him, but the sound of a submachine gun. A curtain of red swirled in front of him...and the chatter of the submachine gun became the clapping of hundreds of hands and the curtain of red *was* a curtain, falling down on the stage of the Paris theatre.

"Magnifique!" yelled French voices. "Wunderbar!" cried German ones.

He was sitting in a French theatre and he was surrounded by Germans. Surreptitiously he looked down...his peasant attire had been replaced by the baggy trousers and much mended shirt of a townee. His knee was quite close to the knee of a woman - he turned and looked at her - she was young, her auburn hair swirled around his face, her chocolate brown eyes stared into his, lights dancing in them, and her wide, mobile mouth was stretched into a smile. She was beautiful...she was Mrs. Peel.

John Steed opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. What *was* that droning noise...oh, the heating had kicked in. He felt a wonderful warmth on his chest...Mrs. Peel had one arm around him and her head nestled on his shoulder. All he could see was her auburn hair but bits of it shone like gold. He moved his neck ever so slightly and placed a kiss on that hair.

Why had he woken up? Everything had been going so nicely.

It hadn't been Mrs. Peel, of course, that time. His first mission over enemy lines, botched from the get-go. He'd been scared from the very beginning, and everything had started going wrong, and his adrenalin had kicked in and the fear had gone leaving him with a desperate rage and a mind that had worked like a coiled spring. But he wouldn't have been able to escape those Germans...it hadn't been hundreds of Germans...it had just been five...but he couldn't have escaped them without...Lucille. Lucille Brouget. Yes, that had been her name. The woman from the French Underground who'd saved his life. The first woman who'd shown him what a woman was capable of when placed in dangerous situations. Bravery. Determination. Strength. Skill. Humor. She'd possessed them all in spades.

He'd tried to find her, after the war. He hadn't fallen in love with her, didn't have any sentimental attachment to her, but he'd wanted to know that she'd survived. She hadn't...but it hadn't been the Germans who'd killed her.

She'd been playing the Game...pretending to be a Collaborator, saving dozens of English and hundreds of French lives while she did so...and just days after Liberation the denizens of her town had condemned her and sentenced her to death. There'd been no trial, really, he'd been told, it had just been mob rage. They hadn't had the guts to resist the Germans openly while they'd been occupied, but once the Germans were gone they had no fear in ganging up on a single woman, dragging her through the streets, not listening to her explanations. Finally she'd spat at their feet before they shot her against the wall of the town church. This is what he'd been told by one of the grief-stricken murderers....only a few hours later the truth had come out when horror stricken Resistance leaders from Paris had told them what they'd done.

Steed brought his free hand up to his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't want to think of that. He had the urge to get up...move about...but he couldn't, not with Mrs. Peel lying there.

Why had he started dreaming about that, anyway? Oh, yes...the drone of that damned heater...like the drone of the engines on that plane. Funny, how things brought back memories. A smell, a taste, a sound. He remembered, just a few years ago, driving underneath a train track. There'd been a long line of traffic in front of him so he'd been stuck right underneath the tracks as the train had gone by. And as he'd sat there in his Bentley with the train rattling above him he'd begun to feel more and more nervous...his palms had gone damp and there was a chill in his chest. If the line of traffic hadn't started moving at just that second he'd been about to jump up and run out from that underpass. And for weeks after that he'd always avoided driving underneath train underpasses so that that wouldn't happen again.

He'd mentioned it to Dr. Teazel, the service psychiatrist - who'd also been in the War. And Teazel had asked him if he'd ever been under fire from a mortar barrage, or something similar, and Steed had nodded and said yes and the memory had clicked - the sound of that train roaring overhead had sounded exactly like a mortar barrage, and that sound had affected him subconsciously. The next day he'd driven to a train underpass and sat underneath it, waiting for a train to come by, and the sound of it hadn't affected him at all. Knowledge was power.

Absently he began stroking Emma's hair.

The war had started it all, of course. When you are sure you're going to your death every day, you didn't want to miss a single thing that life had to offer. Eating a fine meal, drinking a fine wine, making love to a fine woman. But you might be dead the next day so you could never commit to that woman, never make her feel like there was a future between the two

of you.

And after the War there'd been secret service work, and the same considerations had applied.

But with Mrs. Peel.... it was different. Not just the fact that she was so talented, so skilled, so capable of saving her own life as well as his - Cathy Gale had been the same way. But he wanted a future with Mrs. Peel. He felt that there *could* be one with her.

And what did Mrs. Peel feel? Well, she was here, in bed, with him. And that was something. "This could be the start of a beautiful friendship," as Humphrey Bogart had said. Of course he was saying it to Claude Rains but that didn't invalidate the saying - it was something one of his Aunties would say as well.

"Mmmmm, Steed."

Emma Peel stirred and lifted her head and looked into his eyes.

He smiled at her, and bent his head, and they kissed. Warm, soft, gentle lips. They parted and looked at each other.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Mmm."

Steed bent forward and kissed her again. Gently, softly. Emma raised her hand from his chest to his cheek and caressed it. Then she ran her hand back around his neck and pulled him towards her. Steed slid down and pressed his body over hers.

They made love quietly, gently. And afterwards they lay together in each other's arms.

A few minutes later: "You realize we have the entire night left," Emma Peel said.

Steed grinned. "The entire night. I wonder what we could do to fill the time."

Emma Peel rolled over on top of him. "I can think of a few things."

"Be gentle with me, Mrs. Peel."

She smiled at him. That lovely, poised, delicious smile. And then she bent down and kissed him. Steed smiled up at her. Yes, this was going to be the start of a beautiful friendship.

Aftermath: The Man-Eater of Surrey Green

Emma Peel opened her eyes and stared upwards uncomprehendingly. She was lying flat on her back on a marble floor...in a small, dark alcove... looking at a ceiling. It was a high ceiling with something...strange....about it. Something....moving. It was covered, choked, with large vines and even as she watched, the tendrils shivered, shuddered, and died.

Memory came flooding back. More quickly than it takes to tell. She and Steed had been investigating the disappearance of several of the nation's top horticulturalists - including a friend of hers, Dr. Laura Burford. They had discovered that a collision between a British space probe and an alien organism had resulted in a man-eating Plant crashing to Earth...in Surrey Green. It had power, this sentient Plant, mental power, the power to take over the minds of human beings. Their search had led them to the estate of Sir Lyle Peterson, where the Maneater had taken over the house, the people who inhabited it...and was about to germinate and thereby take over the entire world.

She and Steed, along with the redoubtable Dr. Sheldon, had come to Surrey Green to prevent that from happening. They'd come armed with weedkiller, and deaf aids, which would prevent the monster from being able to exert any mental power over them. And she'd picked up a shotgun on the way into the house, which had come in quite handy. Things had been going quite well....then her deaf aid had become dislodged...and the Plant had indeed taken over her mind.

It had been a horrifying experience, because she had been *aware* throughout the ordeal. She'd known what she was being forced to do...but she couldn't prevent herself from doing it. *She*, so proud of her mind and mental abilities, her discipline and her willpower...and a disgusting space vegetable had been able to render her mind helpless.

It had forced her to pour out the weedkiller, and while she'd been doing so, Steed had come on the scene. They'd fought. She'd tried desperately *not* to fight back, *not* to keep kicking over the can of weedkiller as the alien was forcing her to do, and perhaps she had succeeded a little because Steed, whom she could tell was holding himself back as well, was eventually able to knock her out.

Now she had regained consciousness and her mind was free from that overwhelming power. Judging by the evidence of dead vines lying everywhere the house and thus the world was free of the voracious space alien. Steed must have been able to get the Plant to ingest the weedkiller.

She started to sit up, and a shrieking pain hit her right between the eyes and caused her to lay back down. When next she opened them Steed, Dr. Sheldon and Sir Lyle Peterson were there, helping her to her feet. Her head ached, her body ached...and she reeked of weedkiller.

Emma looked down at herself. Her leather blazer was missing, but her leather slacks and vest were soaking wet. Wet with weedkiller. How had it gotten all over her clothing? Had she spilled it on herself while she'd been fighting with Steed? Not possible. Her memories of that fight were quite clear. She'd doubtless gotten a little on her, when she'd hit the floor occasionally and skidded through the puddles where she'd been pouring it out, but nowhere near the amount that was on her clothing now. More than that...how had she gotten from the central ballroom, where their fight had taken place, to this little alcove simply infested with vines?

"We've won, my dear," exhorted Dr Sheldon.

They exchanged congratulatory back slaps..feeling the euphoria that comes with dicing with death and emerging victorious. Then Emma took a deep breath as she remembered her friend...and the other horticulturists....and the landsmen who'd been forced to build the construction which had housed the creature...all those people and none of them had been around during their climactic battle. "We've got to search the house," Emma said. "We've got to find Laura."

"I don't think we will find them," said Lyle Peterson very slowly. "I'm afraid..." he glanced at Steed. "I'm afraid, we won't find them."

"We've got to look," Emma said.

"We don't need to do that," Steed said. "I'll call Wing Commander Davies. He'll send a crew here. Let them search."

Emma stood still for some seconds. She knew what Peterson hadn't wanted to say. They were all dead. Worse than that....they'd all been...devoured....by the alien.

"Right," she said. "Let's get out of this. We've done our job."

She turned to give a last look at the alcove, and in the far corner, where she *knew* the heart...and mouth...of the creature to be...was her leather jacket. She went over and picked it up. It was soaking wet with weedkiller.

Emma blinked several times as realization dawned. Peterson and Sheldon exchanged glances, and then they exited the alcove leaving Steed and Mrs. Peel alone.

"Why am I covered in weedkiller, Steed?" she asked quietly.

"We knew weedkiller would kill the creature, Mrs. Peel." he said, just as quietly. "You were unconscious and it knew you were....easy pickings."

"So you poured the weedkiller over me and let it drag me away?"

"Yes."

Emma Peel stared into John Steed's eyes for several seconds. Then she slapped him across the face - hard. She spun on her heel and walked away.

Steed stood there, eyes wide, cheek stinging. Mrs. Peel had *slapped* him. *Mrs. Peel* had slapped him.

They bouted all the time...and got physical then, of course. They couldn't take it easy with each other when they were training to defeat the enemy. But, in their private life, they rarely argued...and *never* got violent with each other. It would not have occurred to either of them. It was not something a gentleman did, and it was not something of which a lady would take advantage.

Steed swallowed hard. He felt cold. He felt sick. Sicker than he had when he'd watched that tentacled monstrosity drag away the unconscious Mrs. Peel. He *knew* she'd be safe, but there was always that cold kernel of agonizing doubt.... But he'd had to do it. It had been the only way to defeat the thing. The only way. And now...Mrs. Peel had walked *away* from him. It was the fact that she'd walked away that had him frightened now.

He settled his bowler securely on his head, as if preparing for battle, and left the alcove.

Dr. Sheldon was too enamored of the alien's remains to want to leave without examining it, and there wasn't room for Sir Lyle in any case. Emma stood by her Lotus, arms crossed over her chest., eyes narrowed in thought.

"Mrs. Peel," Steed said, "Are you ready to leave?"

She looked at him. "No, Steed, I need some time alone. I'll find my own way home." She handed him the keys to the Lotus.

"Mrs. Peel, I will give you time alone while you drive me home, and then we'll talk."

Emma looked at him. "Very well." She hugged Dr. Sheldon, shook Lyle Peterson's and then clambered into the Lotus. Steed squeezed in beside her.

Mrs. Peel didn't speak to him for the entire journey...and he didn't speak to her. She wasn't engaged in childish sulking, he knew. Nor giving him the cold shoulder to 'punish' him. He knew her well enough to know that she was deep in thought and the outcome of her thinking would affect their future together. He let her think. He wasn't going to let her get out of the car until he'd had his say.

Emma Peel was thinking of all of her days with John Steed. She'd met him first seven or eight months ago, when she'd driven into the back of his car - which he had arranged. He'd suspected her of being some kind of criminal. A spy.

It had been just a few months after the death of her husband, test pilot Peter Peel. He'd been missing for some time, lost over the Amazon, and somehow she'd known he was dead, and had started her mourning. But she'd gotten confirmation...that day. She'd left the building - the Knight Industries building which she had inherited from her father and which she had taken onward and upward, and in so doing had walked into a situation. A man had ran past her with a knife. She'd grabbed him and spun him into the wall...and then she'd left the scene because she hadn't wanted to be bothered with the aftermath.

But that man had been a double agent, running away from Steed's cohorts, with super sensitive microfilm in his possession. John Steed had witnessed it, and followed her into the country, where he'd arranged to meet her...by causing her to run into the back of his car. They'd talked for a few minutes, exchanging insurance information, and in those few minutes Steed had decided that she was merely an innocent bystander with quick reflexes. Then, when the double agent's body had been searched at Department S's headquarters and the microfilm had *not* been found, he'd had second thoughts. He'd come to her flat and confronted her, but she'd made short work of his suspicions, and indeed it turned out their had been a double agent at Department S itself who had made off with the microfilm.

Then she'd gone to West Berlin, as a final pilgrimage to remember her husband, and there she had met Max Prendergast, a charming, unique individual with a bizarre sense of humor. She'd liked him, enjoyed his company...though she'd suspected there was something distorted underneath his charm...and indeed, then Steed had arrived, to reveal that Prendergast was a vicious psychopath who'd been taking the money of refugees desperate to get into the West and then leaving them for dead. Steed had enlisted her help, and she'd delayed Prendergast, giving the police time to arrive and arrest him.

That event in Berlin had given her a taste of the excitement and danger of working with Steed and Department S. She'd missed that, after Peter's disappearance, the feeling one got of being totally alive while one was staring death in the face. She'd decided she wanted more of it. And Steed had agreed. They became partners.

Her first 'official' adventure had been one that the files called 'The Master Minds.' She and Steed had infiltrated an organization called Ransack, which had mass hypnotized people of genius level and used them to perform crimes against the people, and the state. Next had come the case of the businessmen on the stock exchange...the prime movers of companies who had unexpected, and fatal, heart attacks. They'd found their suspects, Ben Jago and Co., and worked to infiltrate the organization. Steed had had his fun with her on that assignment, giving her a cover story as a wealthy widow from Barbados, but then casting doubt on it when they were introduced to each other at the Jago's home. He did like his fun, Steed.

Then he'd put her to work in a department store, Pinters, after an agent's body had been found dumped in an alley - the only clue a store receipt dated Sunday. They ended up foiling a madman's plan to explode a nuclear bomb in the heart of London.

Three adventures, in which he'd trained her in the fine points of being a secret agent for her majesty's government. Breaking codes, enciphering codes, how to interrogate suspects, how to enter buildings filled with suspects, how to subdue suspects. He hadn't had to teach her any martial arts...she'd been training in them for over seven years - but he'd honed the fine points, taught her some moves, subjected her to 'role playing' attackers of all kinds.

She'd made mistakes, of course, walked into danger a couple of times needlessly, and though Steed had arrived in time to rescue her, it had hurt her pride, those mistakes, and she'd learned from them. Not only that Steed would always be there for her but that she'd better be there for herself - so that she could be there for him as well.

He'd also exerted all of his charm on her - the typical lady's man, Emma remembered with a smile. Though she found him attractive, she had not responded to his overtures. In part because she was still mourning for her husband, in part because she did not want what he wanted - a casual relationship. A relationship of convenience.

Then had come Christmas, and Steed had been under attack by some demonic psychics attempting to turn his brain to mush so that they could pluck his secrets out of it, like plums out of pudding. She'd saved his life on that occasion, and afterwards...they had made love for the first time.

Her feelings for him had changed after that case. He'd been vulnerable, and he'd allowed

her to see that vulnerability. But with all the pressure he'd been under he still managed to maintain his charm and insouciance. And while he'd not told her all the details of the attack - he'd been afraid she might be under the psychic's mind control as well - he had trusted her enough to put his life in her hands. And she'd repaid that trust by saving his life.

Then had come "The Cybernauts," as the file called it, and then 'The Gravediggers,' and then he'd put her to work at the Chessman Hotel. Weeks later she'd come close to being squeezed to death in a wine press. And finally, they had tackled the case of Psev, the great Russian secret agent. Steed had played the role of his own double, Webster, and she'd had to pretend that he fooled her into thinking that 'Webster' was Steed. That had been rather entertaining.

In all these cases, she had put her life on the line, as had Steed. He'd rescued her on occasion, she'd rescued him. The point was, she had walked into each case with eyes wide open, and with the belief that Steed would always be there for her.

But this was different. She'd been *unconscious*. Unable to protect herself. And Steed had not only not 'rescued' her, he'd wrapped her up like a Christmas package and let the monster drag her away.

When the Lotus slid to a gentle halt in front of Steed's apartment block, he turned to face her. She turned to face him.

"Mrs. Peel..."

"Let me speak, Steed."

He stopped, waiting for her. He wanted to reach out and hold her, hug her...but he didn't.

Emma took a deep breath. "Steed, intellectually I know you had to do what you did. But emotionally...emotionally I am so hurt...feeling so betrayed....I..." she gestured. "If I continue to speak I'm going to say something I'll regret. Goodbye, Steed."

"No, Mrs. Peel." Steed seized her arm. "You're not being fair," he snapped. "You said it yourself. Intellectually, you *know* I was right to do what I did."

Emma gazed at him. Why *was* she so angry? Why *was* she feeling hurt and betrayed? As her partner Steed had done what he'd had to do...but as her...lover...she hadn't expected that he *could* do such a thing. She'd thought...he loved her. *That* was it. *That* was the problem. He had been willing to sacrifice her, even though he'd loved her. Emma pulled back. How

petty of her to feel like that, but.... Emma shook her head. Her emotions were running too turbulently - she had to have more time to think, analyze her behavior.

Steed gripped her arms angrily. "Yes, Mrs. Peel! If it's necessary I would sacrifice you to protect this country. But only if I couldn't sacrifice myself first."

Emma blinked.

"You know how I feel about you." Steed continued. " You *know* I will always be there for you. And I know you will always be there for me. I practically pickled you in that weedkiller. You were *swimming* in it. I *knew* that there was no way that abomination could get through your leather outfit to you. I *knew* it."

Emma gazed at him for long seconds. She knew he spoke the truth. She looked down ruefully at her sodden outfit. "I don't think I'm going to be able to wear leather ever again."

Steed felt a surge of hope and relief. He'd *known* she'd see sense. "Certainly not that outfit, at any rate," he agreed.

Emma reached up and caressed the cheek she'd slapped. "I'm sorry about that, Steed."

He smiled. He seized her hand and held the back of her fingers to his lips. Then his nose wrinkled.

"I say, Mrs. Peel..."

"Don't blame *me*, Steed." she said with mock coldness.

"Oh, it's entirely my fault, Mrs. Peel. You must let me correct the matter. Come upstairs and let me give you a bath."

Emma nodded. "It's only fair," she agreed.

They exited the Lotus. Steed tapped his bowler back on his head in a jaunty fashion and followed Mrs. Peel upstairs

The Howliween

Chapter One

I.

"This is living," Mrs. Peel, "said John Steed, lounging back in the first class seat of the Boeing 747. "This is style."

"This is elegance, mile by mile," agreed Emma Peel, lounging beside him.

"Have some more champagne, Mrs. Peel."

"I don't mind if I do."

It was not thanks to the munificence of the Ministry that Agent Steed and Special Agent Peel were flying first class to the United States of America, (they'd have been in the baggage compartment if the Ministry had had to pay for it) nor was it the munificence of Emma Peel, (though she certainly would have seen her way clear to spending the money had it proved necessary). Rather, the United States government had invited two top agents to their shores to address a Security Conference on the necessity of cooperation between the forces of England and the United States, and had provided the first class tickets as the opening gambit to an all-expenses-paid trip.

Steed and Mrs. Peel, who had had an exceptionally trying, but triumphant, month of action against the forces of the Other Side, had been selected as the Ministry's representatives.

A stewardess came by with a tray of canapes, which she placed on the table before them. They were seated not in their chairs, which were spacious enough, but in the first class lounge at the very top of the plane. They were flying in the brand new Boeing 747, just unveiled that year. There were no other passengers in the area - indeed the first class compartment was sparsely filled. Mrs. Peel helped herself to a canape.

"Do you have your speech written?" she asked Steed, after having finished that canape and a second one.

"Speech?" asked Steed, absently, addressing himself to the lighting of a cigar.

"Speech," Mrs. Peel repeated.

"I never write speeches, Mrs. Peel," Steed said, amused. "I don't have to. I shall be witty and extemporaneous and riveting."

Mrs. Peel nodded, a slight smile on her lips. She reached into the inside pocket of the leather blazer she was wearing against the chill of the plane and pulled out a sheaf of paper. "Here."

"What's this?"

"Your speech."

"Thank you, Mrs. Peel. I knew I could count on you."

Steed placed the papers in his own inner pocket.

"You are going to study it a bit before the conference, Steed." Mrs. Peel said. It was more an order than a question.

"Of course, Mrs. Peel. Time enough for that when we reach solid ground." He looked at his watch. "I think the movie is just about to start. Fancy - watching a motion picture while we're flying 45,000 miles up in the sky. We can't miss it."

Mrs. Peel finished the rest of the canapes, took her champagne glass and followed Steed down the circular staircase to their seats in the first class section. She smiled fondly at the back of his head. His enthusiasm - for the most sophisticated plane yet constructed, for the opulence of the first class section, for such luxuries as watching movies on a plane, was genuine and youthful and very endearing. And as she sat with the headphones pinching her ears, he held her hand in his, while he watched *Hot Millions* with utter concentration. Emma Peel found herself longing for popcorn!

The plane began its descent toward La Guardia Airport. Steed and Mrs. Peel had just woken up, had breakfast, and rubbed their faces with the warm towels provided by the stewardesses. Emma had appropriated the window seat the last time Steed had visited the restroom, and pressed her nose close to the glass to look at the skyline of New York far below. Steed's chest pressed warmly against her shoulder as he craned his neck beside her.

They didn't sit back in their seats until the plane's wheels had touched ground, and yet they still had a half hour while the plane taxied around the airport toward the appropriate arrival gate. "October in New York City," Mrs. Peel mused. "I'm surprised at these Americans.

I would have thought the CIA would be holding this convention in Florida, or even Hawaii."

"Just goes to show that this is actually going to be a *working* convention, Mrs. Peel," Steed said reprovingly.

"Good thing you wrote that speech, then," Mrs. Peel agreed.

"*Touche*, my dear."

"Had you never wanted to travel to the United States before, Steed?"

"Oh, yes, I've often wanted to come here. Just never had the time. Life's been a bit busy these last few years."

"Mmm." Mrs. Peel agreed. "Well, after the convention we should stick around for a while. Take in some of the sights."

"I'd love to see some plays on Broadway," Steed said.

"Me, too. There's also a couple of avant garde art museums I've heard about and would love to see."

"Oh, yes, that *will* be fun."

Emma elbowed him in the ribs.

"What about the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC?" Steed suggested. "I'd love to see the exhibits they have there."

"Now that's a wonderful idea, Steed. Washington isn't very far away, I believe."

Steed nodded, thoughtfully. "Not *too* far," he murmured. "Depending on how you go."

II.

The first class section disembarked first. Steed placed bowler on head, retrieved his umbrella from the tiny storage closet, straightened his jacket, lowered Mrs. Peel's travel bag down from the storage compartment, and allowed her to precede him down the stairway to the concrete below. As she appeared in the gangway of the plane she placed dark glasses over her eyes to protect them from the sun, and brushed a strand of hair back to its proper place

behind her ear.

The plane had stopped some little distance from the terminal, but as they had been instructed, they did not follow the rest of the passengers who would have to make their way through Customs. A man in dark glasses stood by a limousine parked on the runway, holding a handwritten sign that said STEED. Emma nudged Steed. 'Do you think he's waiting for us,' she murmured. "I think it's a safe assumption," he replied.



A man driving a small truck pulling a long line of empty carts (each one with an orange-clad man standing in it) pulled up in front of the plane. The orange-clad men jumped off and swarmed into the luggage compartments. Soon suitcases began raining down onto the tarmac.

The man in the dark glasses waited as Steed and Mrs. Peel walked up to him.

"How do you do," said Steed, extending his hand. "My name is John Steed, this is Mrs. Emma Peel."

The American had ran his eyes up and down Steed - from the top of his bowler to his patent leather shoes - but he shook hands without hesitation. Then he looked Mrs. Peel up and down through his black sunglasses. "I thought there were supposed to be two agents from England," he said.

"There are," said Emma Peel. "I'm a *special* agent."

"Yeah, right." He turned and opened the door of the car for them. "In you get."

"What about our luggage?" Steed asked.

"There's a man inside. He knows what to look for. Names Steed and Peel." He took another glance at Mrs. Peel. "We don't want you to have to wait for that. We're going all the way out into Westchester."

He closed the door after Steed clambered in, got into the driver's seat, started the engine, and soon they were speeding down the tarmac as if he thought he could get the car to get off the ground.

Steed took a glance at Mrs. Peel. She looked amused. Ah oh. That amusement did not mean that she had appreciated their chauffeur's remark, nor his attitude afterward. She returned his glance and Steed grimaced at her sympathetically. It wouldn't take Mrs. Peel long at all to establish her credentials, and woe to the American who chose to make her prove herself. Mrs. Peel knew what he was thinking. She nodded at him.

The chauffeur did not speak with them on the long trip into Westchester, through the snarls of traffic, nor did they to him. Steed experimented with all of the knobs and switches in the rear compartment and soon they were drinking champagne, eating chocolates, and listening to Rachmaninoff.

The sky had been a cool grey when they'd debarked from the plane, now in Westchester, snow began to fall. Just single flakes - but large ones, falling down slowly and glistening in the car headlights. "It's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas," Mrs. Peel hummed. Steed smiled at her. For various and sundry reasons Christmas was always a special time for them.

"Wow," said Steed, as the limousine took the exit off the highway and drove into a long sweeping drive, up to a mansion which would have done any of the stately homes of England proud. It was practically as big as Windsor Castle, but without the battlements.

"Wow?" Mrs. Peel repeated, looking at him.

"I've been practicing my Americanisms, Mrs. Peel"

"Just don't get *too* American, Steed."

"Perish the thought, Mrs. Peel."

Their driver held the limousine door open for them, then walked in front of them up to the door of the mansion and knocked on the door in a peculiar rhythm. "They already know we're here," he explained. "Cameras at the gate. But we like the knock, too."

The door was opened by a butler. Steed and Mrs. Peel exchanged amused glances, quickly, as he stepped back, and Steed allowed Mrs. Peel to enter the hallway in front of him. Their driver sketched a salute at the butler and turned away.

"My name is Munsey," said the butler. He was youngish, in his thirties, with golden hair close cropped, the fringe brushed forward in the fashion made stylish by the Romans. His eyes were a bright blue, his lips thin and mobile, his face square. He filled the tuxedo quite nicely, Emm noted appreciatively. He must "work out" as the Americans said. "You are

Steed and....Peel?" He looked at Mrs. Peel, and smiled showing exceedingly white teeth.

"I'm Mrs. Emma Peel," Emma said, extending her hand. He took it with alacrity.

"Delighted to meet you," said Munsey.

"And I'm John Steed," said Steed, extending his hand. Munsey took his eyes away from Emma Peel and, reluctantly, disengaged her hand. He took Steed's.

"Well," said Munsey, releasing Steed's hand and smiling at Emma, "nice to meet you both. Agents Alex Ramsay and David DeLancie are in charge of the conference. They're in the main conference room right now. They wanted to meet you when you arrived. Just for a few minutes - then they'll let you get settled in."

"Certainly," said Steed.

"This way." As they walked along, Munsey commented, "We use this place just for meetings like this. Suites for all the big names, visitors like you guys. All the regular agents have to stay in hotels."

"We're honored," Steed said.

Munsey grinned at him. "Nothing but the best for visitors to our shores. Here's Conference Room Alpha."

He knocked on the door, with the same rhythm as their driver had displayed. Then he opened the door and preceded Steed and Emma into the room.

David DeLancie was a tall man, a couple of inches taller than Steed, with black hair growing in a widow's peak down his forehead and full lips. Alex Ramsay was Steed's height, balding, portly, but with clear, steady brown eyes and a sense of power exuding from him. They shook hands. Ramsay spoke in a slow southern drawl as he gestured for Steed and Emma to take seats while Munsey took up his position by the door.

"Delighted to meet you both," Ramsay said. "Your Ministry sent us along your files." He flourished a couple of manila envelopes. "One significant omission, though." He smiled at Mrs. Peel. "Referred to you as E. Peel. Not Mrs. Peel. We weren't expecting a woman. But your list of skills is certainly impressive. Quite impressive."

"Thank you." Emma said, calmly.

"Some of our best cryptographers are women," Ramsay continued, thoughtfully. "Our data analysts. Our backroom people. But...a field agent. That's....different. The rest of the guys are going to get a treat when they meet you."

"I can hardly wait."

Adam Ramsay smiled at her absently, then turned to Steed. "I see you were in the war, Mr. Steed. Did some work in France - now, I was there too." And soon Steed and Ramsay were in deep conversation about the Maquis. Emma smiled faintly. She too knew all about the Maquis - all about World War II, in fact. But she hadn't *experienced* it, in the trenches, like these men had. She wouldn't try to interject her comments. Let them reminisce. But she'd been in many a dark and dangerous trench in the secret war that followed, and in any conversation on that she could - and would - hold her own.

"Well," said Ramsay, at last. "It's been a pleasure. We're looking forward to your talks tonight. But I suppose we've kept you a little longer than we should - you must want to freshen up, unpack, things like that."

Steed and Emma rose.

Munsey opened the door for them, and preceded them into the hallway. "Right," he said. "I'll take you up to your rooms. As you can see I'm the butler for this little shindig. We're going to do you Brits up proud. Talks tonight - you two are giving yours. Then tomorrow more talks. Social evening tomorrow night. You'll meet the rest of our top guys. They'll be bringing dates as well - it's Hallowe'en. Costume party." He glanced at Steed who was holding his bowler in one hand. "You guys have Hallowe'en in England?"

"No," said Steed.

"But you were told about the party, weren't you? Brought your costumes, I see."

"Our costumes are in our luggage," Mrs. Peel said with a smile at Steed.

"Oh," said Munsey, with another glance at Steed. "Well..." He handed a small booklet to Steed, and one to Mrs. Peel. "This tells you what's going to be covered. What times your talks are tonight. So, up these stairs here. Flight was okay?" he asked Mrs. Peel.

"Wonderful, thank you."

"No jetlag, I hope."

"None at all. Steed and I are first class travelers." said Mrs. Peel. "We just want to wash the travel dust off."

"Right. Well, this is your room, Mrs. Peel, and that's your room on this side, Mr...uh, Steed."

"Thank you."

Munsey appeared to want to say something else, perhaps something humorous about it being a lucky thing they hadn't intended to have 'Steed and Peel' room together, Steed thought savagely. Or maybe he'd wanted to say that it had been a pity. Which it had been, Steed thought tangentially.

But Munsey only coughed and then said, "Stay up here as long as you like, get refreshed. Your luggage already arrived - you'll find it inside. When you're ready, come back down, and I'll give you a tour of the place. We've got some pretty nice stuff in here."

He headed back down the stairs. Steed and Mrs. Peel looked at each other, then Mrs. Peel opened the door to her room and they went inside.

Chapter Two

Steed took off his bowler and brushed off imaginary dust with studied calm. "Charming fellow, that Mr. Munsey," he said lightly.

Emma laughed. "That driver wasn't. I wonder who is more representative of the agents we're going to meet here this weekend."

"I don't think I care for either kind," Steed said.

Emma caressed his arm. "Don't sulk, Steed. I'm the one who's going to have to prove myself to these people. Mr. Ramsay made that quite clear."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Peel. Meeting you is going to be a treat for them."

Emma gave him a dirty look, to which he responded with a cheeky grin. "Well, I'm going to go take a shower." he said. "Shall I call for you in about half an hour?"

"Lovely."

Emma Peel opened her suitcase, laid out a new outfit to change into, and placed the rest of

her clothing in the appropriate places in the chest of drawers and closet. She paused and smiled as she picked up her costume for that night - a scarlet cloak and an over-the-knee-length dress. She was going as Little Red Riding Hood. Steed, of course, was going as The Wolf.

She took a long shower, enjoying the feeling of the hot needles against her smooth skin. The flight had been long, but First Class had certainly made it comfortable. Steed, of course, could fall asleep anywhere in any condition. She'd slept well in her first class seat, but it certainly felt good to get that airplane smell out of her body.

A few minutes later Steed knocked on her door.

"Come," she called.

Her room was just like his, a veritable suite, with a king-sized bed faced by a large television, a couch and two chairs. He entered, dressed in the tan slacks and a black turtleneck sweater, to see her seated on the bed, leafing through the booklet for the weekend's activities. Emma always loved him in that turtleneck. It did show off his own musculature so well.

He sat down beside him. "Anything interesting?"

"A few things. There's some cryptography that'll interest you. There's going to be a talk on recruiting. They want to get more African-Americans into the program."

"But no women, hm?" said Steed.

"Precisely." Emma nodded. Something was going to be done about *that* this weekend.

Steed twitched the pamphlet out of her hands and took a glance at it, then put it down, rubbing his hands together, smiling cheerfully. "And our talks are in here for tonight. We're the only two speakers. 'Interservice cooperation between the CIA and MI5.' That's me. And your 'Devising a cover for the undercover agent' will certainly knock them dead."

"Let's hope so," said Emma Peel.

"Well, shall we go on the Grand Tour?"

Emma nodded.

Munsey escorted them around with enthusiasm, ushering them into each room and explaining

about the sophisticated equipment within. And, indeed, they could not be helped but be fascinated by the technology displayed. Both Steed and Emma showed such interest and asked such intelligent questions that Munsey was soon deferring to Steed quite as much as Emma. Though he did seem to be striving to curb the tendency to take her by the arm as they walked through the endless corridors.

That night, after a delicious meal which Steed and Emma shared in the main dining room with Ramsay, DeLancie, Munsey, and a couple of other administrative agents, they gave their talks. Steed's went over quite well. He had read the paper Mrs. Peel prepared for him thoroughly, and interpolated some of his own WWII experiences into it, and his audience of some thirty big, burly men in black business suits listened avidly.

Then it was Emma Peel's turn. Steed introduced her as his partner, with whom he'd worked for several years. There was quite a stir when she went to the podium. Many a glance was exchanged. Emma was no stranger to speaking in front of a room of men - having done so in the Knight Industries Board Room on more than one occasion. And she knew whereof she spoke, so soon most of her audience had 'bought into' her presentation.

But there always had to be a troublemaker, and, really, Emma was quite relieved when he raised his hand. "What if things go wrong?" he demanded. "Good as a cover is, sometimes things go wrong that can't be foreseen, and then we have to get out of there quickly."

"Then you do so," Mrs. Peel told him. "You should always have not one, but two escape routes prepared, so that if something does go wrong, you can get out in a hurry."

"That's easy for you to say," the American said. "That's easy to say. But when you're actually out in the field...." he looked around at his fellow agents, "We should be hearing from someone who actually has experience in this type of thing."

"I *do* have experience," Mrs. Peel said calmly.

"Oh, sure. And I suppose it's easy for a woman. All you've got to do is seduce the men who capture you, so they'll do anything you want, but for us guys..."

Emma Peel's eyes narrowed, even as John Steed lowered his head into his hand.

His point had been a valid one - training for secret service work was not a question of 'those who can, do; those who can't, teach.' and these men had a right to know that the people giving them their training actually knew what they were talking about. And Mrs. Peel had anticipated that she would have to show these men --- physically. They all paid respect to

strength, not to wisdom, to paraphrase C. S. Lewis, she thought. But this American had gone just a wee bit too far and so the demonstration she was about to give was going to be a bit more brutal than she had originally intended.

"Will you come up here, please," she said, extending a hand and gesturing for him to come forward. He looked at her. "Please," she repeated. "You raise a valid point. You've just been captured by the villains and you're not a woman. How are you going to escape? Come up here, please, and help me to demonstrate."

He set his jaw, rose, settled his tie, and came forward. There was a murmuring in the room.

"What's your name?" Emma asked him.

"Gary Fessler."

"Okay, Gary." Mrs. Peel pushed the podium to one side, and then she faced him, legs spread slightly so that she was balanced on the balls of her feet, arms at her sides. "You've just caught me. Take me to your leader."

"What?"

"Come on, Gary. You don't believe I belong on this stage. Throw me off of it. If you can."

He darted a look out to his audience - clearly uncomfortable to be seen bullying a woman, then he reached forward and took hold of her arm. Instantly Emma's other hand flashed across, grabbed his and her fingers settled into the pressure points. Fessler winced and dropped to his knees as she twisted his wrist and then his arm into a very painful position. "This is called Chin-Na," Emma said loudly, to the multitude. "The art of pressure points. A woman such as myself can hold a man helpless merely by applying force to a nerve endings."

She released her grip and stepped back. Holding his hand, Fessler got to his feet. There was an ugly look on his face. He was angry now.

Emma crooked her fingers in a 'come on' gesture again. He did so. This time he actually swung a punch. Quickly, very quickly, very powerfully, at her head. If it had connected she would probably have been knocked unconscious. But Emma ducked underneath it, slid behind his torso which was still twisting due to the power of the punch, stuck one leg in between both of his and shoved. He went flying forward. "That's judo," Emma called out. "Using your opponent's own speed and weight against him."

Fessler regained his feet. This time he roared and came towards her in a rush, both arms spread out to grab and crush her. Emma timed it perfectly, putting her arms on his biceps, a foot in his belly, and falling backward, carrying him with her. He cartwheeled over her and landed on his back with a crash. He stayed down this time.

"That was *tomoenage*," announced Mrs. Peel, settling a lock of hair back into place as she rose. "The Circle Throw. Also judo." The entire room erupted into enthusiastic applause.

Emma smiled, then turned and helped the stunned Fessler to his feet. "Let's give a big hand to Gary, for helping me give this demonstration. When the agent - man or woman - is properly trained, this kind of thing is possible. But everyone, you must always remember that violence of this sort is the last resort. Cunning over strength, every time."

Well, that had sealed Mrs. Peel's popularity, Steed thought, relaxing in a corner while he watched the scrum of agents around Mrs. Peel, eager to talk about how to devise a cover and how to design escape routes. She'd won them over, all right. A little wham, bam, thank you ma'am and she had them all eating out of her hand. Except, perhaps, for Agent Fessler. He hadn't stayed around very long after Mrs. Peel had finished her talk.

"That was *so* impressive." Agent Munsey was at his side, but his eyes were on the scrum which concealed Mrs. Peel.

"Mrs. Peel is a remarkable woman," Steed said.

Munsey nodded. "Mrs...she's married, eh?"

"Widowed."

Munsey nodded again, his blue eyes gleaming. "And you two are..."

"Partners," Steed said, with emphasis.

Munsey looked at him appraisingly. "Right, right. Well, you guys were great tonight. 'Jolly good show,' as you Brits say."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Peel appeared through the scrum, apparently having made her excuses, and while the agents remained to be talked to by Munsey - who had acted as moderator for the occasion, she and Steed made their way up to their rooms.

"You were marvelous, Mrs. Peel," Steed commented.

"Thank you, Steed."

They stopped in front of her room. "Care for a little champagne?" Emma queried.

"Need you ask?" said Steed. Emma grinned.

Emma handed him a glass and then reclined next to him on the bed while they sipped. They stared at the huge black box of the television set in front of them. "Shall I turn it on?" Emma asked. "Take a look at American television?"

"I had it on briefly this afternoon," Steed commented. "They certainly have a lot of channels. More so than us. But those commercials....every fifteen minutes they're stopping the story to sell you something."

Emma tsk, tsked.

"And the radio," Steed said, pained. "No soap operas, no dramas, no dramatic readings. Just a lot of music of the strangest kind. And traffic reports."

"We're reduced to books then," Emma said. "Any books of interest in your room?"

"I wouldn't say that's *all* we're reduced to," Steed said impishly.

"Books?" Emma repeated, giving him her patented look.

"No books." Steed answered, sadly.

"Hmm, none in mine, either. And I don't recall Munsey showing us a library here - yet there must be one. I'll ask him about it tomorrow."

She finished her champagne, and taking Steed's empty glass as well rinsed them out in the kitchenette sink. When she turned around Steed was right behind her, preventing her from moving.

"Seems to me I've captured you, Mrs. Peel. Would you like to seduce me to allow you to escape?"

Emma grinned. She kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, Steed."

Steed sighed. He knew what that meant. They were 'on business' and Mrs. Peel didn't like to mix business with pleasure. An unfortunate principle of hers. That was the best time for it.

"Good night, Mrs. Peel."

IV.

As Emma Peel had expected, Munsey's costume was that of a Roman Centurion. His sleeveless tunic, with its short skirt, displayed arms and legs possessing a deep tan, and the smooth musculature of a David. He threaded his way through the brightly-and-exotically dressed throng and greeted her and Steed as they entered the ballroom.

Steed's tuxedo fit him like a glove. Above the tuxedo he wore a papier-mache mask of a wolf. His eyes lit up as they surveyed the room. As had been promised, there were plenty of women in tonight. Wives, or girlfriends? And how many of them could he charm from under the noses of their dates in the few hours he had available? "I'll see you later, Mrs. Peel," he murmured, and slid into the throng with a loping gait.

"Ahoooooo," Emma murmured after him.

"I beg your pardon?" said Munsey.

"Nothing." Emma took Munsey's arm, smiling at him dazzyingly. "Shall we dance?"

As the room swirled around in a kaleidoscope of color, there were two unmoving dark spots. A man in one corner, almost invisible in the shadows, wearing the costume of an executioner. A man in another corner, even more invisible in the shadows, clad in a tuxedo, wearing a papier-mache mask of a wolf, not *quite* the quality of the one worn by John Steed, waited, eyes on the scarlet cloak of Emma Peel. He was stalking his prey, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

How many glasses of champagne had she drunk so far? he wondered. Had he missed any? Stupid woman, to allow herself to get inebriated at a function like this. Not that they all didn't do it. Everyone 'let their hair down' at parties...and the Brits were notorious for the amount of liquor they could go through.

Not that it seemed to be affecting her at all, he thought. Two hours and she was on her sixth glass of champagne...was she drinking them all or setting them down half full...with someone at her side immediately to press another one onto her...she'd certainly made a lot

of friends in her brief time in the States, the wolf-man thought as he watched the movement of men around her. Except that poor schmuck Fessler, of course.

He couldn't wait much longer.... Should he make his move? It didn't look like her friend Steed was paying her any attention at all. He'd got quite a crowd around him as well. Telling old war stories to the ladies, no doubt. *Everybody* was probably half-soused, and in this light the woman wouldn't notice that his mask wasn't quite the same as her friend's. Get her out into the hallway, give her the snow job, and he'd have her out in his car and speeding towards the airport in no time at all.

The wolf-man raised his hands and adjusted the fit of his gloves, and then he moved out into the room, threading his way towards his prey. She was standing right next to the doors leading out into the hallway, the perfect situation.

He came up behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Emma," he whispered, knowing that his whisper would disguise the sound of his voice to some degree and mask any accent that he failed to possess. "I need to talk to you outside."

She turned and looked at him strangely, but he merely increased the pressure on her arm and pulled her towards the door.

Once out in the hallway, he said, still whispering, "We need to leave, now. I just got a call. Come on."

Before anything more could be said, the door opened again, and the man in the executioner outfit slipped into the hallway. "Hold it, you two." ‘

The wolf-man swore under his breath. He recognized the voice. It was Fessler. What did the fool think he was doing?

Fessler was holding an executioner's axe. Its blade gleamed, sharply.

Emma Peel turned to look at the wolf-man. "Steed, I think that he thinks...." she did not finish her sentence, but continued turning, simultaneously driving a stiffened, spade like hand into the wolf-man's belly, and as he bent forward gasping for breath she brought her knife-hand down on the back of his neck, sending him flat out on the polished floor.

"What the hell...?" demanded Gary Fessler.

"That was karate, Mr. Fessler." Emma reached down and pulled off the papier-mache mask,

revealing the face of a man unknown to her. "Do you know who this is?"

The man behind the executioner's mask stared. "No. But it's not your Steed, that's for sure."

"Another lesson for you, Mr. Fessler. Never try to fool an agent's partner by dressing up in borrowed fur. Especially if you can't manage the accent and don't know how the two people address each other."

"I'll remember that," Fessler said, "but...but what..?"

"I think he was trying to kidnap me. Now, there's no point in ruining the party. *I'm* going back in. Do you want to take care of this for me?"

Fessler stared at her for long seconds, then he nodded. "Right, ma'am. Leave him to me." He leaned his axe against the doorjamb, took off mask and costume in one swoop to reveal the sober black business suit underneath. He reached underneath the back of his jacket to pull out a set of handcuffs, and applied them securely to the ex-wolf-man's wrists. Then he hauled the still-unconscious man to his feet and hefted him effortlessly over one shoulder. "We'll be in the Interrogation Room," Fessler said. "Once he wakes up, I'll make him sing like a canary."

"Thank you, Fessler."

Emma re-entered the ballroom, and as she did so a man in a wolf-mask and tuxedo appeared by her side. "Mrs. Peel," came Steed's unmistakable voice. "I was beginning to wonder where you'd got to."

"Just dispensing another lesson in undercover work," Emma replied, taking his arm. "It worked out quite remarkably well. And on that note, shall we dance?"

"With pleasure, Mrs. Peel."

V.

By the time Steed and Emma were ready to travel toward Washington, DC, all had been explained. Fessler had indeed managed to get the truth out of the wolf-man, whom, it turned out, had been the agent who collected their luggage from the airport. He'd been instructed by his real masters, behind the Iron Curtain, to kidnap one of the two British agents, in order to disrupt the conference, and had elected to take Mrs. Peel as the easiest target. He regretted that now, of course.

"Quite a weekend," Emma Peel said, adjusting her leather flying cap over her coiffure and pulling large goggles down over her eyes.

"Mmm," murmured Steed, in the seat in front of her, his eyes intent on the millions of little dials in front of him as he gripped the pilot's wheel. "Shall we take the scenic route, Mrs. Peel?" he queried, pulling back on the throttle.

"I think a straight line is always the best in these types of situations, Steed."

"Right you are, Mrs. Peel."

The biplane soared into the air, banked steeply, and headed out over the ocean towards their next destination.

The End of Howliween

Sole Remedy

I.

Emma Peel lay on her back on a weight bench, grasping the upright bars with her hands, her legs elevated and extended in front of her. Slowly she brought her knees up to her chest, and then equally as slowly extended them back out into space. She repeated this twenty four times more, breathing slowly and evenly.

She was in a martial arts dojo called Kadoban. Although it was located in the heart of London, very few people knew of its existence, for its clientele was very exclusive.

The dojo consisted of a very large room, with floor-to-ceiling mirrors on all four walls, and dozens of thick mats scattered over a highly polished wooden floor. In one corner were several weight benches and free weights, punching bags, and various sized rings hanging from the ceiling. The men's locker room was spacious, as befitted the fact that the majority of people using the dojo were men. The locker room that Emma Peel used was small and makeshift, but she didn't complain. She wasn't there for the amenities, she was there to keep fit.

Emma lowered her legs to the bench and lay there for several seconds, breathing deeply. Her limbs ached, and it felt good. She'd completed her regimen for the day - performing several sets of repetitions with light weights. Fifty pounds for bar work such as bench presses and curls, a hundred pounds or more for leg work such as curls and extensions. It wasn't her aim to bulk up, but to maintain a hard, firm body.

Emma towed perspiration from her face and looked up to see John Steed standing before her. He wore slacks, turtleneck and an apologetic expression. "Sorry I'm late, Mrs. Peel."

"Hullo, Steed. Sensei Cheesoo gave me your message that you were detained."

"You've finished?"

"Just have to do my final stretching exercises, then I'm done."

She accepted Steed's hand with a smile as she rose to her feet, and released it as she sank down on one of the mats and started doing hurdler stretches. Steed replaced her on the weight bench, watching her movements with appreciation. She was so dedicated to honing

her skills - both mental and physical, and it was a joy to watch the utter concentration with which she worked. Every day in every way she intended to become better and better.

John Steed had joined Kadoban when he and Mrs. Peel first became partners, and they'd trained together at least three times a week for several months, developing their tag-team skills. Recently they'd cut their workouts down to once a week (as they'd have plans for evenings three times a week, instead), but Mrs. Peel still came here on her own every other day, as she had for years. Today, they were supposed to have worked out together.

Emma rose to her feet gracefully, accepting the towel Steed held out to her. "I'll be out in ten minutes," she told him, heading into her locker room.

Steed passed the time watching a few uniformed men on the dojo floor. It was a beginner's karate class. They were being taught the various stances - front, rear, horse, cat, and how to deliver blows from within those stances. It wasn't how *he'd* train anyone to fight. Go after a student with his umbrella, swinging this way and that, and have the student skitter along the floor figuring out the best way to block, sidestep, and use ingenuity to get the umbrella away from him - that's how *he'd* do it. Mrs. Peel had caught on *real* fast, he thought with a reminiscent smile. Not that she was a beginner. She was good. Very good. In fact, her reflexes were probably a smidgen faster than his. (They needed to be, with the flamboyant style of fighting she liked to use, he thought tangently. He'd have to do something about that.) He had her beat on speed by a fraction, however, so they evened out in that department.

"All right, Steed," Emma said, resting her hand on the shoulder. He rose, smiling.

"Well, Mrs. Peel," Steed said as they walked out of Kadoban. "I hated to miss our workout but I had to meet my sister. You've heard me speak of my sister?"

"I've heard you speak of your aunts, and your nephew," Emma replied. "The one who likes space guns."

"Ah, yes. That would be the son of my sister. A charming child." Steed shook his head doubtfully. "Anyway, I've been persuaded to take on a side job. You are now looking at the acquirer-at-large for my sister's transport museum."

"Steed. How lovely!"

"I think I'll be able to enjoy myself," Steed agreed smugly.

"I'm sure you will." She'd been walking beside Steed as he took turn after turn. Now she glanced at him. "What's our target for today, Steed?"

"I thought, the British Museum."

Emma arched an eyebrow at him. "How very....stodgy of you."

"The British Museum? *Stodgy*?"

In addition to bouting together, Steed and Emma's current training day program, as proposed by Steed, was to visit a business establishment and plot a spectacular theft. He'd gotten the idea after the case of the Ransack Organization some months ago (and indeed, Emma had established a foundation to take over that organization and turn it back to its original purpose). After they worked out the details of the 'caper', they'd send their plans, anonymously, to the people in charge, with suggestions on how to increase their security.

But The British Museum? What was there to be stolen, wondered Emma Peel. Everything there was so.....large.

II.

"You have *got* to be kidding," said Mrs. Emma Peel, giving Steed one of her patented 'Peelish' looks.

"Not up to the challenge, Mrs. Peel?"

"It's a *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, Steed. It's a lot of old bones!"

"Shhhh." Steed hissed urgently. His ex-partner Cathy Gale still worked at the British Museum, and though he had no intention of looking her up today, if someone went around criticizing 'old' bones she'd sense it and be on them in no time. And the lecture on bones - from archaeological to anthropological - she would give!

Emma gave him another Peelish look, but he didn't explain his sudden apprehensive glances.

"All right, Steed," Emma said, humoring him. "*Why* a Tyrannosaurus Rex? Yes, it would be a challenge to make off with it, but it would be even more of a challenge to *fence* it."

"Oh, I don't know," Steed said airily. "Lots of museums these days want dinosaur bones. And the Tyrannosaurus Rex is *the* dinosaur. The top of the range. The definite article. So,

let's give it some thought, shall we?"

"It's easy," Emma said, glancing at the sole, ancient security guard perched on a stool in a far corner. "We forge, out of plaster of paris, all of the bones of this dinosaur, then every Sunday we come in here. While I fascinate the guard in my own inimitable style, you nip up onto the dinosaur and replace our cast of one of the bones for the real thing. We'll have this dinosaur out of here in, oh, about fifteen years."

"You're not taking this seriously, Mrs. Peel."

III.

They decided to take tea at the Charing Cross Hotel. Emma found them seats on a sofa in the Tea Room while Steed went to get their refreshments.

While Emma waited, she people-watched. The clientele was mostly American, eager to sample the British experience of tea and cucumber sandwiches. She noticed three people come into the tea room. An elderly lady, flanked by a young and a middle aged man, walked, with the aid of a cane, to a seat on the opposite side of hers. By the cut of their clothes she suspected that at least two of them were foreigners...French, she guessed. Her suspicions were verified seconds later, when they began to speak. Mrs. Peel did not normally listen in on other's people's conversations, at least not those that took place in the genteel atmosphere of the Charing Cross Hotel, but this time she did, and when Steed joined her with a tray of teacups and biscuits, she waved him to silence.

IV

Madame Dominique Truffaut walked slowly through the lobby of the Charing Cross Hotel. She was an old woman, and her legs hurt her. Beside her on her right walked Ulrich Edlon, a young German with a fresh, eager expression on his face, and on her left, Philip Reynard, a middle-aged Englishman with a tooth-brush mustache, exuding dignity and grace.

The two men waited while Madame Truffaut lowered herself down with difficulty onto one of the comfy chairs in the lounge. "May I get you some tea, Mrs. Truffaut?" Reynard asked her solicitously in French.

"Oui," the old woman told him with a smile.

Reynard gestured for Edlon to sit down as well. "Tea for you, Herr Edlon?" he asked in German

"Ja." said that young man.

The two people, young and old, sat stiffly in their seats, exchanging the universal language of smiles. Behind them, on a chair facing in the other direction, could be seen the auburn hair of a woman. They neither of them paid any attention to her. Neither did Reynard, when he returned with a tray.

"The hotel clerk assured me it will not be much longer before your room is ready, Madame Truffaut," Reynard told the old woman in perfect French. He then turned to Edlon and told him the same thing in impeccable German.

"I am very tired, but I understand these things, of course," Mrs. Truffaut told him. "The business of the hotel, it is a difficult one." She sipped tea. "I am so excited, Monsieur Reynard. When I came here to London to auction my Vermeer, I had no idea what would result from it. Except for the money, of course," she said with a smile. "But to meet the son of Emil Edlon. What an honor!"

"It was indeed fortuitous that he saw your name in the Sotheby's catalog. He has traveled all the way from Germany to meet you," Reynard told her enthusiastically. "He had heard the rumor that you and your husband had purchased some of his father's work. Imagine his joy to find out that was true! He so wants to see your collection."

"Well, he must certainly come to my chalet for a visit! We must arrange it so. I would be pleased to let him view the works as much as he likes. But, we are ignoring him."

Reynard smiled at her, and with a hand on her arm, turned to Edlon. "Herr Edlon, I have wonderful news," he said in German. "Mrs. Truffaut says that, although these paintings of your father have been in her family for a long time, she would be delighted to sell them to you."

It was at this point that Emma Peel's ears pricked up.

"Wunderbar," he exclaimed. "Wunderbar." He leaned across Reynard and shook hands with Mrs. Truffaut excitedly.

"How charming he is," she told Reynard indulgently. "So enthusiastic."

"You are doing him a great service, Mrs. Truffaut," Reynard told her in French. "He has been searching for his father's paintings for a long time. The chance to see them, all gathered in one place...he is overwhelmed. He will return home a happy man." Reynard looked up.

"Ah. Here comes the concierge of the hotel."

A tall, slender gray haired man approached, along with a woman who was clearly Madame Truffaut's maid. "Mr. Reynard, Herr Edlon, Madame Truffaut, allow me to apologize for the delay. Madame Truffaut, your room is now ready."

"Your room is ready, Madame Truffaut," Reynard translated.

"But not Herr Edlon's? I cannot..."

"No, please, Madame. You are tired. Let the concierge escort you to your room, and your maid help you settle in. You must rest. Herr Edlon understands."

"Well, I *am* very tired."

Reynard and Edlon watched Madame Truffaut totter away on the arm of her maid, and then they began to speak much more animatedly, in German.

"Herr Edlon, this discovery of a cache of your father's work is stupendous. It will be as famous as would be the discovery of the Amber Panels or the Crown Jewels of Troy."

"And she will sell it all to me?"

"Assuredly. She is not interested in the money - she is only interested in returning those paintings to who she views as their rightful owner. The Entartete Kunst was a terrible thing, Herr Edlon."

"You do not need to tell me that, Herr Reynard," Edlon said, a trifle sharply.

"Of course, of course," Reynard said. "Please forgive me. I meant no insensitivity."

"No, please, I apologize also, Herr Reynard. I did not mean to be brusque."

The two men rose, as the concierge appeared at the doorway and signaled to them.

V.

Emma Peel and John Steed looked at each other. "I know what the Amber Panels are," Steed said. "And I know what the Crown Jewels of Troy are. And I firmly believe they are not missing but were 'liberated' by the Soviets and are buried deep in the Hermitage and no one

will see them again until the present government of the Soviet collapses...may that not be far off. But *what* is the Entartete Kunst?"

"For Emil Edlon, it was poetic justice," said Emma Peel grimly. "He was a Nazi, Steed. More than that, he was an Old Comrade."

"Someone who joined the Nazi party before Hitler came to power," Steed said, nodding.

"Right. He was a virulent anti-Semitic who lauded every time the Jews were stripped of some part of their German citizenship. He didn't think they had the right to hold a job, to teach in German schools or universities, to publish in German magazines, to live wherever they wanted."

"And the poetic justice?"

Emma's lips curved. "He was also an artist. A very prestigious artist, a professor at a top university, President of the Art Council. But, he was an Impressionist painter. And if there's one thing Hitler hated more than another it was an Impressionist painter. When he came to power, all art that wasn't representative - that didn't look exactly like the model it was painted from - was purged. Labeled decadent. Even though he was an Old Comrade, Edlon was stripped of his titles, fired from the University, his paint and brushes were taken from him, and he was forbidden to paint ever again. He was pretty much rendered a non-citizen."

"That *is* ironic." Steed said with a grin

Emma nodded. "And that's where the Entartete Kunst came in. 1936. The Nazis held an exhibition of Degenerate Art. They pulled all Impressionist, Expressionist, Cubist and other art from the walls of museums and private homes, and put it into a single collection. The main exhibit was in Berlin, but they sent a traveling exhibit all around the country, and people came to see it by the thousands. Every painting or sculpture included in the exhibit was ridiculed, mislabeled, the artists slandered. It was a pretty vicious affair. Then, the art was sent into Switzerland, where the pieces were auctioned off, giving the government of Germany a lot of much needed capital."

"And that was the fate of Edlon's paintings?"

"Apparently. And as apparently, Madame Truffaut is the one who acquired them."

Steed and Emma looked at each other. "Mr. Reynard was one lousy interpreter." Emma said.

"Mr. Reynard was telling lies." Steed retorted. "It's incredible that he would do it here, though. In the Tea Room of the Charing Cross Hotel."

Emma shrugged. "There's that old joke. What do you call someone who speaks only one language? American. Perhaps Mr. Reynard thought that only American tourists stay here."

"It wouldn't surprise me," commented Steed. "Though I must say, your average Englishman is a monolinguist as well."

"Unless he spent his formative years sneaking into France and Germany," Emma agreed, caressing Steed's arm.

"Or has an affinity for languages and insatiable desire knowledge," Steed returned with a smile. Emma sipped her tea. "So, what do we have? Mr. Reynard tells Madame Truffaut that Herr Edlon just wants to see the paintings. He is going *sell* him the paintings. What can we extrapolate from that?"

"That a crime is going to be committed. Mr. Reynard seemed to be quite captivated with the thought of a Big Discovery. Once he gets those paintings away from Madame Truffaut, he can't let her live - or she'll ruin everything."

Emma nodded. "Exactly what I was thinking. What are we going to do about it?"

John Steed laced his fingers behind the back of his head and stretched out his legs. "I can see myself as a artist. A Salvador Dali type."

"No, Steed."

He looked at her reproachfully.

"You always get to play the flamboyant role. It's my turn. Now, me....I see myself as the Madwoman of Chaillot....and that would be quite an appropriate role, too."

"How so?"

The play was written by Jean Giraudoux. In addition to being a playwright he was a French politician. He was killed by the Nazis."

Steed nodded. "All right, Mrs. Peel. The Madwoman of Chaillot you shall be."

VI.

I.

The dowager strutted down the Parisian train platform on four inch heels. Her ankle-length gown was old and faded, but the ostrich feathers on her pinwheel hat more than made up for it. Her aged face was covered with white powder, her eyes were buried in oceans of eyeliner, and her lips were rouged almost incandescently. She passed a poorly dressed wretch on the platform, who winked at her impudently. She bestowed a glance on him that would curdle milk, and swept onward to the first class compartments.

The wretch was a tall man, about six foot two if he'd been standing straight up instead of slouching. His turtleneck shirt would have been black had it been clean, as would his trousers. He had a couple days worth of beard stubble on his chin, and a beret jauntily placed on his head.

Steed scratched at his beard stubble absently, and then climbed into a third class carriage. He wouldn't make his move into the first class until they were well underway.

II.

Emma Peel leaned her chin on the fly-in-amber handle of her cane and peered around the first class compartment. Madame Truffaut and Mr. Reynard were seated opposite her. Beside her, having offered up the window seat to her when she'd entered the compartment, was Herr Edlon. Madame Truffaut's maid was obviously in a third class compartment as befitted her social status.

It had not been hard for them to discover where Madame Truffaut lived, nor when she was due to return to that home, in the company of Mr. Reynard and Herr Edlon. The hotel concierge had been most accommodating when Steed had shown him his credentials.

Herr Edlon was busily writing in a notebook, while Madame Truffaut and Mr. Reynard made desultory small talk. Emma reached out and poked Reynard's shoe with her cane. "You speak French very well, young man," she said, in her best Katherine Hepburn imitation. "But you are English, aren't you?" Mr. Reynard gave her a smile showing dazzling white teeth. "Indeed I am, Madame. Though I have lived much of my life in France. Allow me to present to you my card."

He handed over a piece of white pasteboard. "Philip Reynard. Art Acquisitions, Incorporated." Below that was an address on Harley Street. Prestigious indeed.

"You are an artist, Monsieur?" asked Emma.

"No, Madame. But I assist the artist in selling his work, and collectors in obtaining masterpieces. I have been in business for twenty years."

"How fascinating," said Emma Peel. "I myself have no use for art."

At this point, the door slid open, and the very disreputable John Steed, or Jean as he now called himself, entered the compartment and insinuated himself between Emma and Herr Edlon. "Excusez-moi," he said, "Excusez-moi."

Everyone stared at this man who so obviously did not have the price of a ticket - let alone that of a first class ticket.

Emma poked him in the ankle with her cane.

"This is premiere class, you!" she said brusquely in French. "Leave immediately or I shall call the conductor!"

"Do not get your knickers in a twist, grand-maman." said Jean insolently.
"Why should I not ride in premiere class? I'm as good as any of you."

"Outrageous!" Emma snorted. "You insolent puppy! You worm!"

"Ah, grand-mama, calm yourself. Look, you *need* me here. When you get to your destination, who will carry your bags for you? Me. And acquire for you a taxicab? Me. I will do all this for you, so calm yourself."

"No, you garlic-breathed..."

"Madame..Madame, calm yourself," said Philippe Reynard soothingly. "Here, mon brave, come out with me into the corridor." Jean looked at Reynard assessingly, then shrugged sinuously. "Very well."

III.

"Well, *mon brave*," said Philip Reynard once they'd gone out into the corridor, bracing themselves against the swaying of the train, "You are looking for work, eh?"

Jean shrugged. "That is putting it a bit strong, Monsieur. I would not say that I was looking

for *work*."

"But you are looking for money."

Jean straightened up, his eyes glittering. "Oh, yes?"

"Do you know the region of Chateau Rouge? It is in Soissons."

"Of course," said Jean (automatically thinking, "Ah, Soissons." "Who broke the Soissons vase, as the classic riddle has it..")

I know all the regions around here. Like the back of my hand." Mr. Reynard nodded. "That is good to know. I may have a use for your services, *mon brave*. In a couple of days you could make enough money to ride first class on trains for the rest of your life."

"What do you want me to do?" Jean demanded. "For that kind of money I would do anything."

Reynard smiled. It was not a nice smile. "Where is there a bar near the Chateau Rouge?" he asked. "Not in Soissons."

"The nearest local village is Vauxbuin," Jean said, casting his mind back to his WWII days. "The bar there is called *Le Sanglier Bleu*."

"Very well, *mon brave*. Meet me tomorrow night at *Le Sanglier Bleu*, and I will tell you what you must do. Now..." he reached into a walled and pulled out a twenty franc note. "Go back to third class, and do not draw further attention to yourself. Understand?"

Jean plucked the twenty franc notes from Reynard's fingers. "I am the invisible man, Monsieur. Until tomorrow night."

IV.

Jean and Jeanette huddled together over a small table in *Le Sanglier Bleu*. 'Jeanette' had hair down to her waist, a rather revealing blouse and stovepipe trousers. She wore circular glasses over her eyes. They both spoke very quietly in French. They knew that if they spoke in French, no one would try to pay attention to their whispered conversation, but if snatches of German or English were heard, ears would tune in immediately. Also it was imperative that Reynard not know they could speak other languages.

"How far are we going to go with this masquerade?" Emma asked. "I don't think we should break into Madame Truffaut's house. There's no need to frighten her."

"Not to worry, Mrs. Peel. We find out exactly what plan Reynard has in mind, and then we put an end to it immediately. The only one who is going to get frightened is Mr. Reynard"

Emma's lips curved. "Good."

Steed rolled himself a cigarette and lit it. "Would you like one?" he asked Mrs. Peel. She wrinkled her nose at his smoke. "No, thank you."

Steed puffed meditatively.

"Perhaps it would be best if Reynard did not see you first thing, Mrs. Peel. We could play more of a game with him if you entered the scenario at a different time. Go to a corner table, will you? He should be here any second."

Emma nodded and rose. She could tell Steed had suddenly got a plan in mind and when his mental cogs were spinning she did what he told her to do without asking questions - if it had been *she* who'd had the plan he'd do the same for her.

It was almost ten minutes later that Reynard walked into the pub. He pulled up a chair to Jean's table and sat down. He leaned very close to Jean. "Now, *mon brave*, here's exactly what I want you to do."

V.

The knocking on his hotel room door was like the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun, if Reynard had only had the prescience to know it.

He opened the door to a woman who would have been lovely if only her hair hadn't been disheveled and her eyes wide with panic. "Monsieur, Monsieur, you must come at once," the woman hissed at him.

Reynard blinked. "What are you talking about? Who are you?"

She shoved her way into the room. "My Jean, my Jean who was to do a job for you. It has gone catastrophically wrong. You must come!"

Philip Reynard gazed at her in shock. If things had gone wrong the last thing he wanted to do was go with this woman. If *les flics* were on their way, he wanted nothing to do with

them. On the other hand, if he didn't go...Jean would undoubtedly betray him to *les flics*.

"Yes," he said. "I come. Wait here while I get my jacket." Reynard went into the other room (for he was staying at a three star hotel in a two room suite) and picked up a Luger, which he tucked into the waistband of his trousers. He pulled his jacket on and rushed into the other room.

"All right. *En avant*."

"Come, Monsieur, I have my little car." hissed Emma. She climbed into the driver's seat of the ground hugging Deux-Chevaux and Reynard perforce climbed into the passenger's seat beside her.

Emma took off in a squeal of tires and very soon Reynard was grasping the dashboard with white knuckles. When they arrived at le Chateau Rouge Reynard practically fell out of the Deux-Chevaux and kissed the sweet, sweet, unmoving ground.

"Quickly, Monsieur. *Vite, vite!*"

Reynard entered Le Chateau Rouge right behind her, and stopped in abject horror. In the center of the room was a pile of paintings....covered in blood. In one corner of the room Ulrich Edlon lay, his clothes in shreds and literally swimming in blood as if in an abattoir. Jean slouched against the divan, a straight razor in his hand. It was covered in blood, as was his clothing.

"Holy Mother of God," shrieked Reynard, staring at the blood spattered paintings. "What have you done?"

Jean started up. "It is of the paintings you are most concerned? Do you not see what has happened here? He came in, that man, while I was about to make off with these paintings. He attacked me! I had to kill him!"

"Did you have to do it so....completely?" gasped Reynard. "My God, what of Madame Truffaut? Where is she?"

Jean flicked the straight razor towards the ceiling. "I had taken care of her first, of course. She's in her bedroom. She is also completely dead. But she's one you wanted dead, isn't she?"

Reynard's hands were on his face in an unconscious imitation of Munch's The Scream. "Of

course," he gabbled. "Of course. But now... now...and *who* is this woman?"

"That is Jeanette, *ma poule*," Jean said, flicking his straight razor at her. "Now, Monsieur, as you can see things have changed."

"Yes," said Jeanette, "and before we go any further..." All of a sudden she laid hands on him, quicker than he could react to, and suddenly she had his Luger. She backed up, one arm across her breasts, the other with elbow cocked and resting on her arm, while she held the Luger pointing toward the ceiling.

"You won't be needing that, Monsieur," Jean said. "It is all very simple. I need more money."

"Money?" gobbled Reynard. "Money? What good is money going to do you now?"

"Money will make it possible for me to escape, Mr. Englishman," Jean said, stepping very closely to Reynard and placing the cold edge of the straight razor against his throat. Reynard stretched his neck in unconscious imitation of an ostrich.

"I...I have no money with me," squeaked Reynard.

The cold edge bit just a little bit.

"You must have some money."

"Yes, yes, I have lots of money. But not *on* me." squeaked Reynard.

"Very well..."

At this moment, Jeanette shrieked. "Look," she screamed. "Look!"

They turned to look at the staircase leading up to the second floor. Madame Truffaut stood there, blood pouring from a gash in her throat. She stood there, pointing at Reynard. "You!" she shrieked, in a surprising powerful voice for someone whose throat was cut from ear to ear. "My curse upon you, you evil man! Two in this house with throats cut, you worm! Make him the third!"

Jean swiveled to look at Reynard. He brought the straight razor up. Reynard screamed, turned and ran.

Jean sprinted out of the house after him, saw him running madly up the street, and slowed

to a halt. He watched until Reynard disappeared in the distance, followed distantly by a black clad man and woman who had detached themselves from the shadows, and then turned and went back into the house.

Emma was assisting Madame Truffaut in wiping the red paint from her neck, while Edlon was dabbing at his own face with a handkerchief. Steed went to a decanter of whiskey on the sideboard and poured drinks for them all.

"He probably hasn't stopped running yet," Steed said happily. "When he does, Officers Baptiste and Joubert, who are right behind him, will arrest him for conspiracy to commit theft and murder. Mrs. Peel, our job is done."

"And a job well done, Steed," said Emma, lifting her glass to his. "You were marvelous. Chilling."

"I did rather enjoy myself," he admitted.

They turned to Madame Truffaut and Ulrich Edlon.

"We are very grateful to you," Madame Truffaut said in French. "The *cochon*, he deserved the horror he went through tonight."

"Only too happy to be of service, Madame." said Steed. He nodded at Edlon.

"Herr Edlon. The police interpreter remains upstairs. We will leave you to discuss the Edlon Collection between yourselves."

"I am forever grateful," said Ulrich Edlon, gazing at Emma Peel.

She smiled at him, and then took Steed's proffered hand. "Gute Nacht, Herr Edlon," she told him, and she and John Steed walked out of the house and back towards the rented Deux-Chevaux. Steed gazed at it for some seconds.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive, Mrs. Peel?" he said hopefully.

"Get in, Steed," she replied, and slipped into the driver's seat. Steed laughed and got in beside her. Very sedately she let in the clutch and they were on their way. "Let's drive by Reynard," she suggested. "Assuming he's still on the road. A last final wave?"

Steed shrugged. "No more than he deserves. Drive on, Mrs. Peel. Drive on."

Requiem For A Lightweight

Part One

I. The Beginning

Emma Peel leaned against a wall of snow and took a deep breath. The sound of skates cutting into ice filled the air, as did the puffs of breath from various laughing people circling the frozen pond with various levels of proficiency. Emma relaxed and wiggled cold toes inside her skates. An elegantly clad skater glided toward her and stopped at her side with a spray of ice chips. It was CIA agent Munsey, whom she and John Steed had met in the United States a couple of months ago, during a Hallowe'en weekend.

"Come on, Mrs. Peel," he said, grinning. "You're not tired already."

"A certain part of my anatomy is quite sore," Emma told him with a laugh. "I've fallen down more times than I can count."

"Not *that* many times," Munsey protested. "And it's only because you're trying to do tricks. Split jumps - they're not easy to do. I can't believe this is your first time on ice skates. You're a natural."

"I can go straight ahead without a problem," Emma admitted. "I can go to the left and I can go to the right. But trying to do something with a bit of panache, that's a killer."

"You just need to keep practicing."

Emma sighed. She didn't mind learning new skills, or even new sports. In fact she embraced the challenge more often than not. But she was not really a cold weather aficionado - and when she *was* out in the cold weather she'd rather be on a pair of skis rocketing down a mountain than going round and round a frozen pond. Hence her attempt to liven up the proceedings by trying the split jumps and pirouettes that she'd seen ice skaters do on the telly. But she wasn't having much success.

She shook her head decidedly. "I'm through for the day. But don't let me stop you. Carry on."

Munsey twisted around to relax against the wall of snow as well.

"It's nice, this," he said. "Christmas day. People having fun with their new presents. Ooh...that must have hurt."

A young girl had tripped over her skates and went sliding along the ice. She got up, brushing snow from her chin with a laugh, and continued on.

"What is this Boxing Day, though?" Munsey demanded presently. "Is there going to be boxing on television tomorrow?"

Emma laughed. "Ever heard of the Feast of St. Stephen?"

"Uh, no."

"He was the first Christian martyr. His feast day was celebrated on December 26 throughout Europe for a long time. It was the custom to open the alms boxes and distribute the contents to the poor."

"Always nice to give money to the poor one day a year. What did they do for money the rest of the time?"

"Don't get sociological on me, Munsey," Emma warned him. "Anyway, it soon became common practice for apprentices of tradesmen to take boxes around to their master's customers to secure tips for their services of the previous year. Hence the name, Boxing Day."

"I see." said Munsey. His eyes lit up. "I also see someone distributing hot chocolate. Would you like a cup?"

"Yes, please."

II. Enter Steed

Emma walked out of the bathroom toweling her hair dry. After she had accomplished this to her satisfaction she wrapped the towel up into a turban and then climbed into the four poster bed. She piled pillows up behind her back, took up her book - a biography of Caroline Herschel - from the night stand, and began to read.

The telephone rang.

Emma glanced at the clock on the night stand before she picked up the receiver. Then, "Hello, Steed." she said cheerfully.

"Hello, Mrs. Peel. What a pleasure to hear your voice."

Emma smiled. Steed sounded exhausted. "Have you been having fun?" she queried.

"Of course." Steed said sincerely. "There's nothing quite like celebrating Christmas in a house full of nephews and nieces of a certain age. But their parents are annoyed with me. I guess I'll have to give them quieter gifts next year."

"Books, Steed. Books, books, books."

"That's the ticket, I'm afraid," Steed said. "Though then, they'd want me to *read* to them."

"You'd be a great book reader, Steed. I'm sure you could put all kinds of vocal inflection into your voice. And your accents are marvelous."

"You flatter me, Mrs. Peel. So..." his voice suddenly became very casual. "How're things going there? Mr. Munsey enjoying his first English Christmas?"

"He seems to be. Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Christmas goose, Christmas crackers, plum pudding...would you believe he actually thought a plum pudding was made out of plums?"

"Tch, tch, these Americans."

Emma laughed throatily. "Yorkshire pudding had him totally bewildered, too. 'Why do you call it pudding?' he kept asking. He was so funny. And we went ice skating today."

"Remarkable, Mrs. Peel. I didn't know you could ice skate."

Emma shifted her position gingerly on the bed. "I can't." she said. "Though it wasn't for lack of trying. So, when will you be arriving?"

"I'll be leaving here early. If things go as I expect, I'll be rolling up there about noon."

"Lovely," said Emma Peel. "You'll be just in time to help us build a snow man."

"A snowman?" Steed said delightedly. "Am I leaving one house of children only to enter

another?"

"Ha, ha," said Emma. "It's the annual snowman contest, that's all. Best designed snowman wins a prize."

"In that case we must certainly build a snow woman," Steed commented. "Modeled after you. All right, Mrs. Peel, see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, Steed."

Emma hung up the receiver with a fond smile, which slowly faded into one of pensiveness. In some ways it was a pity. Steed adored children, and they him. He would have been a terrific father. He had that child-like streak in him. But in his dangerous profession, he walked with death daily (almost as frequently as with women), and he had early on decided he did not want to take the chance of leaving behind dependents with no one to depend on. So he'd had a vasectomy. Had himself 'fixed,' as he liked to call it. These trips to his relatives for birthdays and holidays were a source of such joy to him. Where would Steed be now, she wondered, if the War had not turned him into what he was?

She, on the other hand, had never liked children, let alone wanted any of her own. The Christmas season was a time to bundle up against the cold, drink cocoa and relax with a good book in front of a roaring fire, with soft music on the stereo and complete silence everywhere else in the house....Children were necessary for the future, of course, so it was good for people who actually *wanted* them to have them. Emma shook her head at that phenomena, and returned to her book.

III. Chimneys

The manor house at which Emma Peel and Munsey were staying was called Chimneys. It deserved its name - there were enough chimney stacks scattered on top of the two vast wings and the central stories to keep a squadron of sweeps busy for a week. Its owners ran the house as a money making proposition. Over Christmas and Boxing Day families came to enjoy a real English Christmas. At other times of the year the rooms were rented out as meeting places for businesses...and even for politicians.

Munsey was part of a group of Americans who were enjoying the Twelve Nights of Christmas, and Emma was a journalist who was writing an article on the American's fascination with the Mother Country. Steed, when he arrived, would be God knew what. He always liked to surprise her.

Emma blinked open her eyes and glanced at her bedside clock. Six a.m. She should be going jogging now - with the rest of the Americans. But frozen bars of sunshine were splintering off her pillow. Emma pulled the covers over her head and went back to sleep. Winters did terrible things to her willpower.

Emma woke again at seven. "Bloody middle of the night," she murmured, and rolled out of bed.

"Missed you this morning," Munsey commented cheerfully over the breakfast table. "We had a pretty good run. There's nothing like a good jog with the sun rising in front of you."

"Oh, well..." Emma said vaguely. "You Americans and your jogging. Forty years from now America will be the fittest nation on the planet, I'm sure."

Munsey grinned. "I wouldn't be surprised." He glanced down at her plate, espying the kippers, "Especially when you Brits eat food like that," he mumbled below his breath, and turned his attention determinedly to eggs and bacon.

IV. The Russians

The Russian trade delegation arrived at Chimneys that morning in two limousines, shepherded by a gleaming white Volvo bearing the Russian's British 'mindere' - the sponsors of the delegation. Seconds afterwards the British trade delegation, in two limousines, pulled up behind them.

At that precise second several men and women, shouting Americanisms and throwing snowballs at each other, came laughingly on the scene stage left and exited stage right, sparing not a glance for the automobiles.

A butler and a rank of liveried footmen came out into the drive. Everyone (except the respective chauffeurs) exited the cars and followed the butler and footmen, now laden with luggage, back into the house.

"Why are we here, Sergei?" hissed limousine driver (and KGB agent) Piotr Pushkin to his counterpart from the other limousine, Alexis Alexandrevich. "This place is simply crawling with Americans!"

"It is all perfectly innocent," Alexis said calmly. "They are part of some kind of holiday package which brings people over here every year. Celebrating the decadent Christmas holiday. Peace on earth, goodwill toward men."

Piotr snickered. "That is what their Christian hymns say, isn't it? So at variance with their Christian practice."

Alexis waved this away. No one practiced what they preached, as far as he was concerned.

The two limousines which had conveyed the British trade delegation drove away. The driver of the white Volvo exited that car, lit a cigarette, and took a deep drag. He gave the Russian drivers a disinterested look and leaned against the bonnet.

Piotr watched him out of the corner of his eye - the man straightened up with a smirk on his face and tossed away the cigarette. Piotr turned and saw a beautiful auburn haired woman following in the wake of the Americans, twiddling with a camera. The British driver trotted after her and took her arm.

Piotr was too far away to hear what they were saying, but the meaning was clear. The driver was asking her out on a date, the woman was refusing. From her gesture at the car it was clear she wasn't interested in a mere chauffeur. He rocked back and forth, hips moving suggestively, and she slapped him. Then with a swirl of her auburn hair she walked away.

The Britisher looked after her, meanwhile feeling in his coat pocket for a cigarette. He lit it, then turned and walked back toward the three cars. He must have felt Piotr watching him because he glanced at Piotr...then came up to them.

"How'd you like that then?" he said in a Cockney accent, blinking heavily lidded eyes at them. "Who did I fight for in the war, that's what I'd like to know. Me and my mates fighting and dying so them nobs could look down their noses at us."

"It is the same in Russia, my friend," Piotr told him unsympathetically. "It is the same everywhere."

"Izzat so?" said the Britisher, blinking away smoke. "I wouldn't think you Bolshies would put up with that. What were *you* fighting that Revolution for, eh?"

Piotr glanced at Alexei. "We are not Bolsheviks," Piotr said. "We are Communists."

"Communists...shmommunists. What were we fighting for but to be able to ask a pretty bit of skirt out on a date and not be told we weren't good enough for her?" He threw the cigarette away. "Well, follow me if you want, to the stables in back of the house. That's where they keep the cars. Then we get to enter through the servant's door. How's that for a turnup, eh?"

Piotr and Alexei shrugged stolidly. They followed the discontented driver in their limousines to the rear of the mansion, where there were plenty of stables converted into garages. Their own suitcases in hand, they followed him into the 'below stairs' kitchen, where a tuxedo clad man informed them of their quarters.

Safely in his room, John Steed straightened hunched shoulders and lit another cigarette. So far, so good.

Part Two

I.

The Chimneys Grand Ballroom was crowded with people speaking a mixture of languages, but the music emanating from the quartet of musicians on a dais in the corner spoke to them all. They were playing a series of traditional Christmas carols.

Emma Peel took a glass of wine from the tray of a passing waiter and went over to a couple of the Russians, standing by the roaring fire. All Russian politicians and businessmen were easy to recognize - their suits were usually drab and ill-fitting. They were also all at least in middle age and usually older.

"*Dosvedanya*," she greeted the men pleasantly. "How do you do? My name is Emma Peel. Mrs. Emma Peel. I'm a journalist."

"It is a pleasure," said one of the Russians in impeccable English. "I am Vassily Gorky, this is my associate Ivan. Are you here to observe the trade talks, Mrs. Peel?"

Vassily Gorky was in his fifties, Emma judged. His hair was gray and cut short, his eyes clear. He was not overly fond of vodka, she deduced. Also although his suit was not the height of fashion it fit him well and did not hide a powerful build. Ivan was a different proposition altogether. His face glowed red, and not from the fireplace, and a paunch strained his trousers to the utmost.

Emma smiled at Vassily. "No, I write for mass media publications, not the financial pages. I'm here covering the Twelve Nights of Christmas celebration."

"What is this twelve nights?" Ivan asked. "It is a play by your Shakespeare, isn't it? I have seen many Shakespeare plays in Moscow. He writes very well. But no one does Shakespeare like our Russian Shakespeare Festival. Your Stratford on the Avon does not even compare."

"*Richard III* is my favorite Shakespearean play," Emma told him with a smile, "but I've never liked *Hamlet*."

Vassily and Ivan exchanged glances of mock horror.

"This is because you have not seen it in Moscow, dear lady," said Ivan. "With Mischa Auer as Hamlet...he would have you in tears by the end of the first act."

"I have no doubt of that," Emma agreed.

The Americans, who were gathered in another corner, started singing along with Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer. Emma glanced up. "I'd better go see what's happening over there." They exchanged friendly nods and Emma walked away.

"Come along, Emma," Munsey cried as she appeared. He put an arm around her shoulder. "Have an eggnog."

Emma shrugged the arm off with a friendly smile. "Sure, Munsey, thanks."

Munsey waved a hand at her apologetically, then used it to give her a cup of the foamy brew.

"Steed's here," Emma told him quietly, as they nodded heads in time to the singing of everyone else. She sipped eggnog. "He's driving for the British trade delegation."

"Staying in the house?" Munsey asked.

"Yes. Servants wing. His room is next to the KGB agents/chauffeurs."

"Cozy." Munsey added more nutmeg to his eggnog. As he drank he casually surveyed the room. "See our man?"

"No."

"Would you recognize our man if you *saw* him?"

"I think so," said Emma confidently. "I've got an artist's eye. Sees right through makeup to the essentials underneath."

"I hope so," said Munsey. "I'd rather know who the guy is beforehand, instead of trying to catch him in the act."

Emma nodded. "I agree. Well, I'm going to circulate. Get a good look at everyone. It's the eyes that will give him away. They can change the shape of the nose, or the cheeks, but they never think to change the shape of the eyes."

"Right," said Munsey. "I'll keep my eye on Gorky. Where's his minders, anyway? Those chauffeurs?"

"They don't know what we know," Emma said, with a shrug. A slight look of irritation crossed her face. They *should* know, she thought. A death threat had been received by the *Times* against an unspecified member of the Russian delegation. Rather than publishing it, the *Times* had brought it to the attention of Scotland Yard, who'd brought in the British secret service. The Russians were not to be told. If the assassination attempt succeeded there would be hell to pay. But, that's why the Department had sent Steed, and her. And Munsey, who was on special assignment.

"They're probably out patrolling the grounds making sure that none of their delegation has the temerity to leave the house," Munsey commented.

"Either that or they're playing poker with Steed and losing badly." Emma said in parting.

II.

John Steed squinted against cigarette smoke as he slowly spread apart his cards. No emotion showed in his face as he tucked them together again. "I'll start with five," he said, tossing a five shilling piece into the middle of the table. Piotr and Alexis also tossed five shilling pieces into the pot. Jack, a footman, put his cards on the table in disgust. Mary, the housekeeper, said in a rich brogue, "I'll see your five and I'll raise you another five."

Hours passed. The stack of coins in front of Mary got larger and larger.

"It's a fine poker player you are, Mary dear," said Steed finally, tossing yet another hand away.

"My retirement would be a comfy one," Mary boasted, "if ye all would play for more than five shillings at a time. But then, none of ye have any courage."

"Oh, I wouldn't say *that*," said Steed, pouring another glass of Courage whiskey for the table. "Still, I suppose you get fresh victims every month or so?"

Mary looked at him. "What do ye mean?"

"All this," said Steed, gesturing to include the kitchen and the whole of the house. "You must go through staff like a dose of salts."

"Not at all!" Mary said indignantly. "I'll have you know we've had the same staff here for ten years. Ten years! The master treats us fine, he does. And all the people coming and going above stairs. Those tourists and such. They tip very well, ye know."

Steed nodded. "Wish I could say the same for my lot," he muttered. "Ah, well. I'll have to make my fortune at poker. C'mon, Mary, deal the cards."

III

Several days passed without incident. Then came January 4 - Twelfth Night.

That morning, John Steed drove the white Volvo out to a local pub. Emma Peel, cross-country skiing with the Americans, fell behind and turned into the same pub for a restorative drink.

"It's going to have to be tonight," Steed told her, as they sat at a corner table. Emma was drinking hot chocolate. Steed was having a pint.

"Not necessarily," Emma commented. "They don't leave for the airport until tomorrow morning. There's always the chance of an auto accident on the way."

"Those Russian limousines are armor plated and have bullet-proofed windows," Steed pointed out. "An auto accident tomorrow will be the least of our worries. No, I think our man is going to do it tonight. There's going to be dinner for everyone, dancing, all kinds of Twelfth Night celebrations. Perfect ambiance for our man."

Emma finished her hot chocolate. "Well, Munsey and I will be there."

"So will I and the Russian chauffeurs. It's going to be egalitarian tonight."

"A jolly time will be had by all."

Steed finished off his pint. "Hopefully all except one."

III.

Emma Peel winced and stopped. "I'm sorry, Ted," she told the American with whom she'd been dancing. "I think I've twisted my ankle somehow. I think I'd better sit out a while."

"Of course," the American said. "Let me help you to a chair."

"That one there, I think," Emma said, nodding towards one that would provide her with a perfect view of the entire room.

"Would you like some wine?" Ted said anxiously. "Some food?"

"A glass of wine would be lovely," Emma said.

Several people stopped by to make sure she was all right. "Just having a rest," Emma said, soothing their fears...and lulling any suspicions. She took the wine Ted offered her and he went to find another dancing partner.

Emma watched the dancers for a while, then allowed her eyes to play around the entire room. Steed and the Russian chauffeurs had assumed station around the buffet table and were busily emptying it. Munsey was talking with one of a German couple who had shown up yesterday - he appeared to be discussing boxing.

Emma sipped her wine and looked at the musicians. They were different than the ones who had been entertaining on Boxing Day. Jazz music tonight - a drummer, a saxophone, a trumpet and an electric guitar. All young men, clad in tuxedos. The drummer...the drummer...

Emma ran a finger over her eyebrow. She'd been shown pictures of the assassin - or rather, the man whom the Department had suspected of being their assassin - a man named Palance. They'd matched his handwriting to the warning message - Palance always handwrote his warning messages and even gave return addresses - of places he'd vacated that same day....

And the drummer, wearing the bowl cut and goatee of the jazz musician, had the eyes of Palance. The same fold of skin at the corners, the same set in the eye sockets.

Why a drummer, Emma wondered. There was not much he could do with a pair of drum sticks.

Griggs, the butler, entered the room at this time and threaded his way through the clusters of

people to Harrison Beckley, the owner and operator of Chimneys. Griggs whispered in his ear. Harrison nodded, clapped the butler on the shoulder, and Griggs bowed and exited through another door - that led into the kitchens, Emma knew.

When the waiters made their rounds the next time, they asked of everyone, "Excuse me, but are you staying in the house or are you visiting for the night?" For those who were only visiting, the waiters explained that it had begun raining outside, and the rain was turning to ice. "The roads are expected to be impassable within a very short time, so if you'd like to stay on, you will be accommodated in the West Wing overnight."

No one elected to leave, as far as Emma could tell...least of all the musicians.

When Munsey stopped over after a few minutes with another glass of wine, Emma beckoned him to sit down. "I think I've found him," she said very quietly, indicating a couple of dancers with her wine glass and smiling.

"Oh, yes?"

"The drummer. He's our man."

Munsey didn't glance in the drummer's direction. Nor did he waste time asking if Emma was sure. He merely nodded and said, "Cool."

"Go tell Steed, will you."

Munsey nodded again. "When are we going to grab him?"

"I'm not sure. Steed will want to do it discreetly. Unless Palance actually stands up and pulls a gun, we probably won't do anything in public."

"As you say. Well, I'll go tell Steed."

Emma did not concern herself with *how* Munsey would contact Steed - that was his business and she knew he'd do it casually. She merely divided her eyes watchfully between the Russians and the drummer. If she remembered correctly - and of course she did - the musicians were given a break every forty-five minutes to go and refresh themselves in the kitchens.. or wherever else they needed to go. Perhaps at that time she should follow them out, and strike up a conversation with the man. She had studied music in school and could speak on the subject intelligently with anyone - indeed she had played the drums herself and would have continued to do so if her upstairs flat neighbors hadn't complained.

Well, she'd sat around long enough. Now that she knew where the danger would be coming from, she might as well get up and circulate once more.

IV.

"Nothing," declared Emma Peel.

"Nada," agreed Munsey. "Zilch. Zippo."

Steed shrugged. "A bit anticlimactic, I admit. But with this ice storm outside, obviously Palance thought better of it. There'd be no way he could escape."

They were in Munsey's room in the West Wing of Chimneys, and it was in the very small hours of the morning.

"So when do we pick him up?" demanded Munsey. "We can't let him get away."

"Tomorrow morning is soon enough." said Steed. "Let him have a comfortable night's sleep. Bung him into a closet tomorrow morning and let him stew until the roads are drivable again."

Munsey nodded. "Right."

V.

In the shadows of the Grand Ballroom, practically invisible, Palance was seated at the drum set. He was banging - quite quietly - on the drum, slowly, as if keeping time for a funeral march.

It was almost daylight. What was he going to do?

A sixth sense had told him that he'd been rumbled. Nothing tangible - he hadn't caught any eyes looking at him when he'd raise his gaze...nevertheless he knew it - he'd been rumbled.

He'd been in his room listening to the weather reports on the radio up until an hour ago. He was surrounded by ice - for twenty miles in every direction it had rained and then iced over and now there was no way out.

No way out.

If there was no way out...should he simply kill Gorky before being arrested? For if he didn't mind being caught, it would be quite easy to kill the man. But he *did* mind. That was the rub. He did not want to spend the rest of his life in prison.

But how to get out? How?

Walk? If he couldn't drive - no one else could either. So there'd be no pursuit, except on foot. No....*not* walk. Ice skate.

Palance picked up the beat a bit as he thought about it. Of course. How stupid! If ice stretched for miles around - simply skate on it!

Those Americans....that group celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas. They were always up early for their bloody morning jog. He'd heard them talking about it last night - indeed several of them had bought him drinks, complemented his on his drumming, and talked to him quite matey like. He knew all about quite a lot of them. And, Americans were stubborn folk. They'd probably get up at an ungodly hour this morning as well, determined to jog if it killed them. He'd suggest ice skating instead and challenge them to a race to the nearest village but one, about ten miles away. Then, once they reached the 'finish line' - he'd simply keep on going. By the time 'they' realized what was happening, he'd be long gone.

Palance smiled. Whew, he thought. I'm going to get out of this yet.

VI.

As the Americans laced on their ice skates excitedly, Munsey tried to think of an excuse to leave the group for a few seconds - to run into the house and tell Steed and Emma what was going on without exciting the suspicion of Palance. For who knew what weapons Palance might not be carrying in his winter jacket? Obviously the man was making a run for it - why else would he suggest this ridiculous race? Which meant he knew he'd been rumbled and if he thought one of these Americans was 'on to him,' who knew what he'd do?

What if he said he was going inside to fill up a flask full of whiskey, to ensure that he'd stay warm during the race? No...knowing the rest of the gang they'd cry 'foul' and not let him do it.

Well...there was only one thing to do.

He lined up with the rest of them, but on the end. When Charley cried, "Go," there was a tremendous roar of blades cutting into ice, some yelling and shoving as the gang jockeyed

for position, and then they were all in front of him, streaking down the ice and moving like a herd of stampeding buffalo. Munsey caught his toe pick on the ice and went down, swearing all the while. Only Charley looked back and laughed at him, the rest of them had thinned out into a line of skaters, intent on the man - or woman - in front of him. Munsey turned and headed for the house.

"Steed," he howled from the doorway - Mary would *kill* him if he ran across the wooden floors in his ice skates, and he simply didn't have time to take them off. "Steed!"

Piotr, the Russian chauffeur, was the only one who responded to his cry.

"Please," Munsey told him urgently. "Steed, the chauffeur. You know him. I need to speak with him urgently. Matter of life or death."

The Russian gazed at him stolidly, then shrugged. "I go get him."

Steed arrived in his pajamas. Munsey saw no sign of Piotr, but he hissed nevertheless.

"Steed! Palance is on the run. On the skate, I should say." Munsey filled him in quickly.

Steed pounded a fist into his other hand. "I should have had a watch on his door. Stupid of me. Well, we'll just have to catch him. I'll go get Mrs. Peel."

"I'll get after them," Munsey said. "Just follow the tracks in the ice."

"Right," said Steed, and vanished.

VII.

"They've got at least a ten minute head start," Mrs. Peel commented as she tugged at the laces of her ice skates.

"I know," Steed said grimly. "But I doubt if he's a professional speed skater."

"Neither are we, if it comes to that," Emma pointed out.

"But there are two of us."

"Twice as slow?" said Emma.

"Not at all. We're going to do what's called drafting. I'm bigger than you are, so I stay in front. You stay right behind me. My body will shield you from the wind. This will save a little bit of exertion on your part. Once we have him in sight, you should be rested enough to go after him."

Emma nodded. "Let's go."

They started out. Steed set the pace. He started out slowly at first, with Mrs. Peel beside him. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her technique, and noted that as usual she had downplayed her abilities. She was moving with an easy action and balancing well.

"Okay, Mrs. Peel," he called to her. "I'm going to speed up to an optimum pace. Once you're ready, get behind me."

Emma nodded. "Right, Steed."

Emma sped up to match Steed's pace, then slowed down slightly and moved in behind him, matching him stride for stride. She could feel no difference in wind resistance, but doubtless Steed knew whereof he spoke. As it was, she placed all her concentration on the man in front of her. It wouldn't matter too much if *she* fell, but if she took Steed out with her, that would be disastrous.

They went on and on, the only sound their skates cutting into the ice. They were going fast, but not so fast that it was a strain at all. Steed was obviously conserving energy. That was fine with her. She could keep up this pace for hours. The only problem was, her only view was of Steed's back. It wasn't a bad back, of course, but not something she wanted to watch hour after hour. "Winter sports," she thought with disgust.

VIII.

Palance was tired. God he was tired. They'd made the village a couple of hours ago - one of the Americans had won. The rest of the Yanks had surrounded him and congratulated him. Palance had skated past them with a wave. "I'm having too much fun to stop," he'd called.

One of the Americans had followed after him. It had been at a distance, though. He'd known it was one of the Americans because, first off, who else could it be? And also, the hair had been a sort of golden bowl - it had been that Munsey chap. Now, an hour later, that American was long gone.

"I'm going to make it," Palance thought jubilantly. "I'm going to make it." He threw back his head and laughed. "Thank you, God," he'd thought. He'd actually been praying for the last hour. He'd sworn that if he'd escaped he would give up the life of an assassin and do something else...start a farm somewhere, grow things instead of kill them....and now...now.... Something made him look back.

It was...hard to see - but there was someone behind him.

No, Palance thought. Nooo. He was soo tired. And so cold.

He gritted his teeth and continued on. It couldn't be one of the Americans. Why would it be one of the Americans? It couldn't be anyone from the house...it must just be someone from the village taking advantage of the ice, that was it. Let that be it, Palance prayed.

A few minutes later he looked back. The fellow was still behind him, still far away, but catching up to him. Someone big.

Palance swore. There was no hope for it. He was going to have to stop soon and take a break. He was beat. Unless...unless...he nodded to himself as he thought about his surroundings. He knew where he was - and he knew that just a hundred meters further on there was a very long, very steep hill. Once he got there, he could go down that and be able to catch his breath.

Palance glanced back. The man was closer...and bigger...it must be one fat chappie, Palance thought. All to the good, he reassured himself. Someone that big would run out of energy sooner rather than later. By the time he'd got to that hill the fellow would be way behind him. Palance gritted his teeth and forced himself to speed up.

IX..

"He's got a plan in mind," Steed called. His face was covered with perspiration and he was maintaining his speed through sheer willpower.

"How do you know?" Emma called from behind him.

"He's changed direction and he's speeding up. He's got a destination in mind now."

"We'd better catch him before he gets there, then," Emma called back.

"He's about twenty meters away," Steed called. "It's over to you now, Mrs. Peel. I'm fagged

out."

"Right."

Emma pushed herself off to one side and took long strides on the skates, passing Steed. He caught up to her and put both hands on her waist. She knew he was going to give her a burst of speed. He sped up and pushed her with steady power....then a final push and she rocketed away from him.

X.

It was a woman, Palance saw with a *frisson* of hope. It must be just someone from the village, then, out for a little exercise. He slowed down in relief. After a minute or so he looked back...she was headed straight for him. Why was she headed straight for him if she was just a villager out for a little exercise?

Well, it didn't matter. It was only a woman, after all. He'd beat her to the hill and with his heavier weight he'd outstrip her on the way down. And if she *did* catch up with him...well, it was only a woman.

Just up this little rise, Palance told himself, then it's all downhill from here.

With a last burst of speed he topped the rise, then tucked himself down into a racing position as he'd seen on the telly and felt a rush of exhilaration as he sped down the hill. He'd made it!

XI.

Emma Peel had gone as fast as she could, but was still five meters behind Palance when he topped the rise and disappeared. If she were a swearing woman, she would have sworn at that moment. She spared a glance behind her. Steed was in the distance but still coming on, exhausted as he must be.

She topped the rise and automatically tucked her body into a crouch as she started down the other side. He'd gained on her...but she was lighter...he still presented more mass and had more wind resistance...if only she could make herself yet smaller...Emma flexed her knees and crouched down lower.

A momentary despair chilled her as she felt herself losing balance, but immediately recovered her sang-froid. She curled into a tight ball...she was only going to have one chance....she slid down the hill faster, angling towards her quarry. At the last minute she extended hands and legs and crashed into him.

Palance went flying. He spun down, caught his toe pick on the ice and stopped short, as it twisted his ankle. He screamed at the pain and then swore vilely.

Emma Peel remained curled into her ball and spun round and round until finally she came to a spread-eagled halt, gazing up at the sky. That had been fun.

She blinked and Palance's face appeared above her, twisted with rage. There was a gun in his hand and he was pointing it right at her. She tensed her legs, preparatory to driving her toe pick into his calf, when suddenly he was gone. Steed had hurtled into him with all the power of a rocket, and when Palance had finished spinning this time he did not get up.

XII.

John Steed entered the drawing room of Chimneys and looked around. He wore evening dress and looked quite elegant. The Russians were gone - all the Americans were gone except Munsey - and he had resumed his true identity. But where was Mrs. Peel, and that rather annoying American?

He put this query to a passing footman.

"They are up on the roof," Steed was told. He arched an eyebrow.

"That way," pointed the footman.

Steed made his way to the roof, and out the door, pulling up his collar as he entered the cold night air. There were quite a number of people on the flat roof, surrounding a relatively large telescope pointed towards the heavens, and one very bright star in particular. Wisps of smoke rose from dozens of cups of coffee and hot chocolate as everyone took their turn at the eyepiece.

Steed joined Munsey - Emma was gazing through the telescope. Finally she straightened and gave a slight sigh before turning and rejoining them. Steed knew what she was thinking. "Peace on Earth, Mrs. Peel," he said. "Good will toward men?"

"Some day," Emma said quietly. "Some day." She lifted up her cup of cocoa, and she, Steed and Munsey touched them together. Then they drank to the toast. "Some day soon," Emma said, again, more quietly, knowing it was a forlorn hope. She sipped her cocoa, shrugged, and then turned a cheerful smile on Steed and Munsey. "Let's go play bridge," she suggested.

Steed took her arm with a smile. He knew Mrs. Peel was a demon bridge player. He'd make up his poker losses in no time at all. "Yes, let's."

The end of Requiem For A Lightweight

THE END

