

# MC 066: The Tenth Letter

Sunday, 23 November 2008

G.I. JOE #66

The Tenth Letter

Cover Date: December, 1987

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Summary (by Foster H. Coker, III): Beneath the Army Language Center in San Francisco, Storm Shadow instructs his young student, Billy, in the Kuji-No-In, "the finger knitting symbols that represent the aspects of the intuitive mind". These include Rin (the first step in learning to channel one's Ki), Pyo (the mastery of the nine letters), To (the pondering of the aspects of reality), Sho (the banishment of illusion), Kai (the cessation of desire), Jin (the unhindered flow of one's Ki), Retsu ("like the wind through the great Bodhisattva Pass"), Zai (the wind that scatters the leaves of memory), and Zen. Storm Shadow surprises Billy with a question about the tenth letter in the sequence and, before he can explain, their training session is interrupted by the arrival of Jinx. She shows them a set of satellite surveillance photos that hold conclusive evidence that Stalker, Quick Kick, and Snow Job are being held in Borovian Gulag 23, near the town of Pvnsk. Jinx also produces a Borovian newspaper clipping announcing an upcoming circus performance in Pvnsk. In the background of the accompanying photo, they recognize Scarlett. Storm Shadow correctly deduces that Snake Eyes and the Blind Master are with her.

The next day finds the circus has indeed come to Pvnsk. Among the exceptionally sparse crowd are Sergeant Mosiev and Olga, two senior members of the gulag's Army detachment. Mosiev recalls having seen the ringmaster, the White Clown, before, but "Something is missing . . . a bareback rider . . ." He interrupts the White Clown's performance with a call to "Bring on the bareback rider!" The White Clown is visibly shaken by the mere mention of the woman and, bully that he is, Mosiev presses his advantage. He recounts the story of the bareback rider, a Borovian beauty named Magda who spoke out against the government and disappeared into the gulags. Mosiev reveals that he has noticed the circus regularly tours only the hinterlands of Borovia, where the gulags are, as if the White Clown were searching for Magda, his long-lost love. The White Clown's reaction confirms the theory. He suffers Mosiev's taunts in pained silence but his loyal companion, Orlovsky the dwarf cannonball, cannot abide the Sergeant's cruelty. He implores Mosiev to tell the White Clown what became of Magda but Mosiev slaps the little man down and refuses on the grounds that the White Clown's internal sorrow is what makes him a great clown. "Who am I," he calls over his shoulder as he leaves, "to deprive the world of laughter?"

Scarlett helps Orlovsky to his feet but he rejects her aid. He is suspicious of the outsiders' motives, and warns them that if they bring hurt to the White Clown, he will make them pay. Once the three outsiders are alone, Scarlett laments their chances of finding their friends. As if on cue, Storm Shadow, Jinx and Billy show up in mufti. "We know where they are," Storm Shadow declares, "let's go get 'em!"

Later, the six marshal artists gather in the big top, the ninja clan hexagram etched in the sand between them. As Orlovsky looks on from hiding, Storm Shadow expounds on the six would-be rescuers and their relationship to the hexagram. Three of them wear the ninja clan tattoo on their right arms., and these three represent the hexagram's three unbroken lines. The other three do not have the tattoo, and they represent the three unbroken lines. As one, the six of them run through the nine letters of the Kuji-No-In. The Blind Master prompts Storm Shadow to name the tenth letter. Storm Shadow answers that the tenth letter has no name for it is the Void, "the nothingness that is the controlling element in Zen swordsmanship . . . the clearing of the mind and soul that must be undertaken before battle." Orlovsky reports the six foreigners' rescue plans to the White Clown, suggesting that if they were to forewarn Mosiev of the impending raid, the Sergeant would owe them the truth about Magda. The White Clown answers that he would do anything to find Magda again.

"Later, at Gulag 23", the alarm claxons announce the escape of a prisoner. Mosiev, the Olympic marksman, goes after the prisoner, leaving the sadistic Olga to discipline the remaining prisoners. As Mosiev's jeep pulls out of camp, the rescue team takes out the gate guards and storms into the gulag.

While Olga brutalizes the prisoners, the martial artists wipe out the gulag's soldiers. In the prisoner barracks, after shooting one prisoner, Olga singles out Boris, the informant who had betrayed the Joe prisoners weeks before. Boris

tries to blame the escape on Snow Job, but Olga feels that the American is too sick to plot an escape. Boris must be lying to protect himself, she decides, so she orders three guards to take Boris to the guard house and beat him to death while she goes back to bed. Soon, Boris's agonized screams resound through the camp, much to Olga's pleasure. Then the ninjas descend on the last three guards, and it is the guards who are crying out in pain.

With all the guards except Olga dead, the rescuers hit the prisoner barracks, complete with AK-47's to arm the prisoners. The rescue team and the three Joes pile into a truck to make for the border but the Borovians, who love their country, remain behind to fight the evil government as part of the underground. Before leaving the gulag, though, the prisoners settle accounts with Olga. Returning with the body of the escapee tied to his jeep, Mosiev finds everyone in camp dead. He radios a call to close the borders then heads for the nearest border crossing "at the river".

The Joes beat Mosiev to the border but, from their vantage point atop a bluff, they find the bridge leading out of the country to be under heavy guard. Just when it looks like the Joes won't make it out of Borovia, the White Clown and Orlovsky show up, towing the dwarf's cannon behind their convertible. Mosiev arrived below, where the border guards have mistaken the booming of the circus cannon for Borovian artillery. But Mosiev spots the escapees in the river and draws a bead . . .

His shot, though, is deflected by the Commandant, because the escapees are already across the border. To shoot them then, the Commandant says, would trigger "another international incident. Have you forgotten", he chides, "what happened when you shot that bareback rider?" Not to be denied, Mosiev turns his rifle to the bluff, where he spots Stalker aiming a rifle at him. "This must be my lucky day," Mosiev says, "the zek Wilkinson wants to engage me in a rifle duel." Two fingers tighten on two triggers, but Stalker shoots first and Mosiev drops lifeless at his comrades' feet.

Stalker is fired from the circus cannon to join his buddies in freedom, leaving the White Clown and Orlovsky behind to pontificate on their future. "Now they will hunt us down," the dwarf worries, "we have lost everything." "To have turned them in would have violated everything Magda believed in," the White Clown answers with a smile. "We have lost nothing . . . in fact, we have gained everything worth having."

Review: Finally! After five long months, Stalker, Quick Kick, and Snow Job are rescued from that Borovian gulag. And rescued with style, I might add. This story is one of the better ones so far as the ninjas are concerned. It focuses on the mysticism inherent in their training, but without overdoing it as sometimes occurred later in the series. These ninjas are dedicated, loyal, courageous and highly dangerous, but not superhuman.

Mosiev and Olga made quite the pair of utterly despicable villains. Of all the non-Cobra villains the Joes encountered in their 150+ issues, these were two of the worst. It was particularly gratifying to see them get their comeuppance. At the same time, this first extended look at the White Clown and Orlovsky show them to be pretty interesting in their own right. At the end of the story, you're left wondering what will become of them and, happily, future issues will revisit these memorable characters. In light of later issues, it seems that Larry Hama may have forgotten all details of this story. It's strongly implied that Mosiev shot and killed the White Clown's beloved Magda. But in later issues, Magda will appear alive and well. It's possible Mosiev shot some other bareback rider, but it's pretty obvious this issue refers to Magda.

One other miniscule quibble: On Pages 5 and 6, the circus cannon base reads "Orlovsky the Dwarf Cannonball", but on Page 21 "Dwarf" has been changed to "Human".

Anyone who thinks of G.I. Joe as a "toy comic" written for pre-teens should be required to read this issue before carving their opinion in stone. "The Tenth Letter" features some pretty gritty moments, including a dead body strapped to a jeep hood like some bizarre hunting trophy, one defenseless prisoner beaten to death, another shot dead in cold blood, and that's just the bad guys' handiwork. The good guys are pretty ruthless themselves, this time around. A small mob of Borovians kills Olga (albeit off screen, and she certainly had it coming), and the rescue team slaughters who-knows-how-many guards, most by ambush. It's pretty strong stuff, but it makes for an awfully good story.

First Appearances:

- Supporting Cast: Orlovsky (first named)

Reprinted in:

- The Transformers (UK) #270-273 (May 19th - June 9th, 1990). A Marvel UK series that began reprinting Action Force stories after the end of that series. These issues reprint this story in four parts, alongside original stories. All references to "G.I. Joe" were changed to "Action Force".

- Classic G.I. JOE: Volume 7 (February 2010). A trade paperback collection from IDW Publishing. Includes issues #61-70.