

Saturday, June 2, 8:45 a.m., Banihal Tunnel, Pir Panjal range, India (3:15 p.m. Tracy Island)

"Ah, there is my beauty," the nondescript man murmured as he opened the stainless steel case. The scanner was much more compact than he had hoped for and, as a bonus, there was a micro disk slipped into the foam rubber casing that held it secure. "Instructions on how to use it, and perhaps even the plans for the device," he said in quiet satisfaction. "Now, to make my escape."

The guards had proved to be no trouble; the thief's hypnotic powers had rendered them unconscious before either could draw a weapon. He put on his infrared goggles again and checked to see if anyone was loitering near this, the second to last car on the train. He drew back as the conductor and another railway employee hurried by, flashlights in hand, heading for the last car. The thief had no idea what was in that last carriage, nor did he care. He had what he had come for and now it was time to leave the train and its passengers to their fate.

He stepped out cautiously, just in time to see the conductor, who had forced open the door to the twisted final car, stumble out of it, coughing, dropping to his knees, then passing out entirely. The other employee, who the thief now recognized as one of the stewards, looked terrified. He pulled the conductor away, beginning to cough on his own. Finally, he too, succumbed to whatever was leaking from the last train.

The bandit, known worldwide as the Hood, turned away from the last car. A slightly acrid smell teased his nose behind the mask he wore and he fought the urge to sneeze. Through his goggles he could see a thin plume of gas rising to the ceiling of the damaged tunnel.

~It would be foolish to pass behind that final car since whatever is in it is knocking out those who go by. I will make my way between the cars instead.

He did so, hurrying to find the shadows of the tunnel wall, pressing the case between himself and the wall to hide it should a torch light fall on him. At last he found the door that would lead him to freedom. Smiling, he opened it, and passed through.

The stairway was long and narrow, and the air got colder as he approached the top. He panted in the thin atmosphere, wishing he had brought along an oxygen mask. He knew how much higher on the mountain the stair would take him, but thought himself in good enough physical condition that he could take those stairs twice within just a few hours. He hadn't counted on the burden of the stainless steel case.

At last he reached the exit, the secured hatchway that would give him access to the clear air and his waiting helijet. He pressed a small device to the lock. It beeped as cheerily as it had earlier and the light on the lock turned green. "Yes!" he cried sharply, then he pushed against the hatch.

Nothing happened.

He frowned, and put down his burden to push with both of his powerful arms.

Again, nothing happened.

He cursed and pushed again, harder. All that he could hear was a slight scraping, as of metal on rock.

He stopped to consider this sound. ~Rocks on the hatch? Who would put rocks on the hatch? The thing was clear when I checked it earlier...

At last it dawned on him what had happened. He cursed long, loudly, and inventively. He cursed the mountain, he cursed the tunnel, and he cursed himself for being blind to this possibility. He cursed until he had to stop, panting, the thin air robbing him of the oxygen he need to continue his ranting.

~Now what do I do? he asked himself, sitting down on one of the upper steps. ~I can go back down but, if I did my job with the explosives correctly, there will be no way out. And there is that gas, whatever it is. It could render me unconscious and I would be captured. Rescue will not come soon enough... unless...

He shook his head and shuddered at the thought, but he knew this was his only option. ~I cannot believe it. I cannot believe things have come to this... when I, Belah Gaat, sworn enemy to International Rescue, must humiliate myself and call upon them for assistance.

He sighed, reached into his pocket for a portable satellite phone, one that any prudent businessman might carry, and one he used to make his disguise complete. ~I can only hope whoever answers the call does not recognize my voice.

He dialed the emergency services number. He knew that his signal would not reach them, but he hoped that his enemies could monitor the airwaves and hear him. "Calling International Rescue... I have an emergency... calling International Rescue..."

From: Tikatu Sent: 11/28/2005[/color

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