**THE PRICE OF PEACE**

**Book Two**

**Counter Strike**

By Justin Bell

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# INTRODUCTION

The world of G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero universe has spanned several decades and spawned numerous continuities. Within these pages imagine the stories told by the immortal Larry Hama from 1982 – 1994 built into one final cataclysmic battle that had supposedly brought the terrorist organization of Cobra to its knees.

Imagine the Cobra hierarchy all dead, the forces of G.I. Joe successful, and with a newfound peace settling over the world, the need for a special missions force dedicated to stopping a singular terrorist threat was no longer necessary.

But several years have passed…tales of the resurgence of the Cobra threat have surfaced in many areas of the world. Rumors of the demise of the Cobra hierarchy may have been exaggerated.

Now Cobra is on the verge of returning, ready to strike, and scattered members of the G.I. Joe special missions force must gather together to form up a line of defense before Cobra can enact its most sinister plan yet. However, a lot has changed in the world of G.I. Joe. Some familiar faces didn’t make it back from that final conflict, and members of the team are dealing with that in their own unique ways. Other members have retired and moved on with their lives, and some new blood has entered the conflict.

Peace had indeed settled over the world, but peace is but a veil covering the twisted machinations underneath…and that peace has its price.

In Book One: Snake Bite, the world seemed like a safe place. Cobra had been defeated…more than defeated, they had been decimated, and the world of International terrorism seemed to be much more manageable.

However, snakes are resilient, and slowly, evidence is revealed that not only is Cobra still operating under the darkness, but they are getting ready to rise up and strike a blow deep into the throat of the world. Various military operations throughout the United States have caught the attention of the right people in Washington, and even as the G.I. Joe team comes together, forming a bond over their own lost souls, Cobra operatives, new and old, begin launching their operations.

The old guard is recruited, while new blood joins the fight, though not all of the veterans are so happy to rejoin the G.I. Joe and Cobra conflict. After Lady Jaye made the ultimate sacrifice, Flint can’t bring himself to join the war yet again, meanwhile G.I. Joe operatives are captured, and worse. To launch this most sinister of plans, Cobra Commander is utilizing his new Shadow-Viper corps, along with his personal bodyguard Snakebite, and his only daughter, a young woman known only as Whisper. No longer content to operate secretly, Cobra launches their plan and the most powerful man in the world is their first target! The mark has been left, and there is no choice but to bring G.I. Joe back into action.

So they prepare… to *Counter Strike*!

# CHAPTER ONE

**REVELATIONS**

The dark skinned man rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands and groaned deeply. His eyes trembled and forced themselves open, although the surroundings were no more visible now than they were. A sticky film seemed to glue his eyelids to the wet pupils underneath and it was a conscious effort just to pry them open. A gray haze clouded his vision as he attempted to sit up in the hard, uncomfortable bed, but then the IV line tugged obnoxiously at his wrist and it shook him out of his fog.

"What the--?" he asked groggily, glancing around the bright green tile room. Florescent lighting washed down on him from the white ceiling and monitors were scattered about his sterile, almost too clean habitat. The room was small and somewhat barren, the trademark bland hospital furniture spread haphazardly over the irritatingly colored tile floor. A small television jutted from the upper corner of the room, but its screen was blank.

"Sergeant Wilkinson," a voice said calmly from just to his left. He twisted, his neck arguing slightly with the unwelcome motion. A balding man with glasses wearing a lab coat and carrying a clipboard was looking at him with concern. "You’re awake."

"Yeah…I guess so. What happened?" Lonzo Wilkinson sat himself up, a sudden pain in his left shoulder searing like a white phosphorous flare just under his flesh. He grunted loudly in pain, and lay back down gingerly.

"Hmm…looks like the morphine is wearing off. We’ll have to get you some more." The doctor jotted down notes on the clipboard that he was carrying.

"Look, Doc…hold off a sec," Stalker asked, leaning forward just slightly.

"Yes, Sergeant?" the doctor asked.

"What am I doing here? What happened…I’m a little fuzzy."

"Hmm…that’s to be expected. You took a bad blow to the head as well as the wound in your shoulder. You were stationed at a base not too far from here. I don’t know the details, but there was a gunfight and explosion, apparently."

Stalker grimaced, as he searched his memory. It was vague. "Damn! Why can’t I remember?"

"There were four other men brought with you…I’m afraid you were the only survivor. Some Federal agents locked the place up tighter than a drum, so something happened there."

Stalker rubbed his eyes with his dark fingers. His vision blurred slightly, but his mind raced. He pictured the four other soldiers. The kid and the three guards…all young, all green recruits thinking that they had innocent guard duty. Now they were gone. But Stalker couldn’t, for the life of him, remember what happened. He scowled in frustration and slammed his fist on the edge of the mattress.

"Sergeant…you must calm yourself. I will get you some more painkillers, please just lie down and relax. There’s nothing you can do for your friends now. Do you have any family we can call?"

Stalker laid his head back and closed his eyes. "No, Doc…no family…" he drifted off to sleep, visions of bullets and bursts of flame dancing in his head.

The halls of the Pentagon were clean and unremarkable. The walls smooth with soundproof padding, the floors slick and metallic. General Hawk’s thick combat boots clanged softly on the hard floor, deep under the surface of the Washington, D.C. City streets. They were six levels down in the famous Washington building, with Top Secret clearance and most of the rooms at their disposal. Two pairs of boots echoed in the smooth hall behind him, just flanking him on either side. The General wore his dress greens, while the two men following him wore their recognizable battle togs. Duke matched his supervisor stride for stride in his tan shirt and green khakis. His dirty blonde hair was neatly crew cut as usual, but the usually present grin was nowhere evident on his face. A small, round, green grenade bounced lightly against his chest, fastened securely to the dark leather strap that ran from his left shoulder down to his right hip. Falcon marched in tune just to Hawk’s left, clad as usual in his green and brown camouflage fatigues and green beret. The neatly pressed, but somewhat baggy uniform was the trademark of the Special Forces unit to which Falcon belonged, and despite the jungle style camouflage, he did not look out of place in this military institution. Down this deep underneath the surface of The Pentagon, strolling soldiers in full battle gear were almost commonplace. There was nothing to hide at this level…if you were down this far under, then it was assumed you knew what was going on in these sealed rooms and behind the locked doors. Said doors were scattered along the walls of the corridor, each one without a label or markings of any kind except for a simple room number. Two men in dark, menacing camouflage, assault rifles at the ready and eyes watching every move you made flanked most. The door that the three men approached was no different. There were two especially large men there, faces directed straight ahead, hearing or seeing nothing but blank wall. As the General approached the unmarked door, the two guards snapped to immediate attention.

"At ease, Gentlemen," Hawk said lowly and they dropped back into a relaxed posture. The metal door slipped open with an almost silent hiss, revealing the planning room behind. Hawk walked confidently inside, Duke and Falcon on his heels. The room was a large, busy technological marvel. The contents inside were classified most top secret, so only Joes were allowed in. A square room sat directly in front of the entryway, its main piece of furniture a large, illuminated map table. The black, plastic table was quite big and glowed ominously, several powerful light bulbs inside trying to blast their way out. The square room had an empty back wall, which actually led to a more rounded, even larger room, the walls buried by banks of supercomputers, radar screens, and monitors. Lights flickered on and off on the computers, which hummed a soft, soothing lullaby. Faint florescent lighting blanketed the rooms with a foggy white haze, and Hawk’s eyes began to ache already. He hadn’t had nearly enough sleep in the past two days, and he could tell that this room was going to be his home for quite some time. Mainframe skidded across the smooth floor in a swivel chair, zipping from one wall of powerful computers to another. He whizzed by Dial Tone who sat still in his swivel chair, a thick set of headphones pressed firmly over his ears, slightly crumpling the black beret on his head. Duke cleared his throat none too silently. Mainframe whirled around in his chair, surprised by the sound. Evidently the computers had muffled the noise of the opening door. As soon as he saw Hawk, he sprang to his feet into a crisp salute. Dial Tone remained seated, blissfully ignorant of his surroundings. Mainframe shot out his right foot and caught the swivel chair square in the backrest, sending the seat lurching forward. Dial Tone’s eyes shot wide as he stumbled forward comically. His headset yanked itself off as he whacked his forehead on the glass screen in front of him. If Hawk weren’t so blasted tired, he would have burst out laughing right then and there. Dial Tone spun to cuss out his partner, but noticed the men standing by the doorway. He swallowed hurriedly and jumped to his feet as well, snapping off a quick salute. Duke and Falcon smirked at each other behind Hawk’s back.

"Relax, Joes," Hawk finally said, putting the two men at ease. He strode calmly past the lit, black table and joined the two experts in their field in the computer room. "What do you have for me?" he asked simply. Duke and Falcon followed him for a few steps, then broke off and stood at opposite ends of the large plastic and glass map table. Duke leaned on his hands and glared down at the glowing section of Earth staring back up at him. It was a map of the Gulf of Mexico, with only one major land mass showing. Cobra Island. He looked back up at his fellow Joe and they exchanged nervous glances. Mainframe rolled his swivel chair over to another bank of supercomputers.

"Well, Hawk…not a whole lot yet. We’ve only been down here a couple of hours while you grabbed your nap. Didn’t you have a chance to sleep on the flight from McGuire?" Mainframe asked, turning.

"Yeah, right…second long beauty rests between having my butt chewed out by all the different branches of our government."

Mainframe shut up. Apparently it had been an uncomfortable flight for the General. He had wondered why he was on a different plane. It was a small passenger one instead of the more common C-130 that was usually used to transport military personnel.

"Have you checked out the radar data?" Hawk asked, composing himself slightly.

"No, sir. We were hoping Blackout would be here with his new imaging program. We’ve heard great things about it." Mainframe replied, glancing over to Dial Tone. The communications officer nodded vigorously to reiterate the point.

"Okay," Hawk replied. "We’ll get the kid in here as soon as we can. He’s a little busy at the moment."

The two Joes nodded. A small, yellow light flickered on the panel in front of Dial Tone. A shrill buzz alerted the occupied Joe to its presence. The mustached man looked down and scooped up the handset that rested in a small, narrow cavity embedded in the panel.

"War room, Level Six," he said calmly. It was a secure line. Dial Tone’s eyes grew slightly. "Yes, sir. He’s right here, sir." He said rapidly. He swiftly handed the headset over to Hawk. "Secretary of Defense for you, sir." He said, twisting his face into a scowl of worry. Hawk merely rolled his eyes and extended his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary?" he said in his most professional voice. "Yes. Sir…made it safe and sound. Yes, sir…we’re just about to go over that, sir." Hawk spoke cleanly and evenly, his face locked in a neutral position. His hand clutched the receiver tightly, a small vein poking up under his tight skin. Suddenly, his eyes popped open slightly, and his fist tightened even more. "Excuse me, sir? I don’t think I heard you right…" he glanced down at the gray receiver in his hand in disbelief. Hawk waited, giving the Secretary a chance to explain again. "Is he sure, sir? I’m not so sure that’s a wise decis—" he was obviously cut off and Dial Tone could hear the slightly raised voice on the other end, although he could not quite make out what was being said. "Well, sir, that’s his prerogative. Let me go on record as saying that I don’t agr—" the voice raised again. "Yes, sir…there is no record…I understand, sir." Hawk’s eyes lowered slightly. His empty fist was now tightened, more veins threatening to burst from their fleshy prison. "Just ask him to reconsider, please, sir. I believe this decision is not in the best interest of the American people." Hawk walked slowly away from the bank of computers, but the thick, curled cord would not let him go far. His shoulders sagged and his head hung. He looked like a man defeated. "I will let them know, sir. Thank you." Hawk lowered the phone from his ear and walked slowly over to the computers, his arm hanging low with the receiver dangling loosely. He actually chuckled slightly and shook his head in bewildered disbelief.

"General?" Duke asked. He had walked over during the rather animated conversation.

"That was The Secretary of Defense." Hawk dropped the phone lightly into its cradle. "The op is off. The Vice-President has decided that any course of action might be deemed a ‘revenge tactic’ and considered as a personal vendetta."

Duke and Falcon stepped closer. They had an awful feeling about where this was heading.

"The Vice-President doesn’t want to make any rash decisions. According to him, there isn’t enough proof that it was a Cobra plot. He doesn’t want American soldiers shooting up an uninhabited island. He wants to postpone the Cobra Island Op until next January."

"You mean, after inauguration," Duke sneered.

Hawk nodded, his eyes roaming.

"So what are we supposed to do with all of these Joes who just re-upped?" Falcon’s voice bordered on a shout.

Hawk paced slowly along the smooth floor, his mind searching for answers. "I assume they all stay active. Continue training until January." Hawk crossed his arms and continued to scan the small room.

"But do you think Cobra will stay dormant until then? They have a reason for this, sir. They always do!" Dial Tone was up and out of his chair.

Hawk halted his motions, a clear resolution settling over his blue eyes. "Calm down, boys," Hawk said, a slight grin twisting up the corners of his mouth.

"The Secretary didn’t say anything about abandoning this room or equipment." He twisted his blonde hared head from Joe to Joe, visually taking in their reactions. Understanding seemed to be settling in with everyone there.

"I think we’re still in business here." The other Joes began to grin.

"Mainframe?"

"Yes, sir!" Mainframe said, proudly.

"Find me those radar files. Go back as far as you can. This Pentagon brass wants proof? Hell, we’ll give them all the proof they need!" he shouted and the other Joes in the room grinned widely. For the moment, anyway, the old General Hawk seemed to be back.

The faint white shard of moon shone like a jagged beacon in the thrashing waves of the uneasy ocean waters just off of the west shore of Cobra Island. A virtual blockade of thick forest cut off the central part of the island from the crashing, angry surf on the west coast. The water mixed with the land to create a thick, marshy swampland, which quickly became plentiful wet forest. The somewhat dark night was made almost pitch black under the plump canopy of trees. Trees of many different shapes and sizes grew here, thriving off of the strong, fresh soil from the relatively newly formed land. A lack of constant use and misuse did nothing but help the prosperous woodlands’ growth. So thick were the trees that even only a quarter mile from the former Command Center of Cobra Island, the ruined, broken buildings were all but invisible. From inside the woods, there appeared to be miles and miles of nothing but nature, which is exactly how Cobra wanted it. The nature of the west coast of the island made it very tough to defend, so the raging woodlands helped keep the Island safer. Not only that, but the southwest corner, where the island was so hard to defend from was almost impossible to reach without travelling through Cobra’s powerful, but undetectable radar umbrella. This very strong satellite dish was embedded in the towering volcano on the eastern side of the island, the powerful waves of sound and light broadcast through the open top underneath a thin, lava colored façade. By any conventional forms of radar or detection, the island did indeed appear uninhabited. Nothing but a vacant airfield, unmanned machine gun nests, cracked and deserted watchtowers and a graveyard of concrete bunkers and other constructs. Deep beneath the thick cover of treetops and the even thicker cover of dark night, near the west coast, a small group of Night-Vipers roamed through the trees. There were five of them, each one similarly equipped. They wore the standard issue green and black uniform, a large backpack carrying the necessities. A shotgun was securely strapped to each man’s right thigh, and they all carried small submachine guns, fully automatic, but easy to carry and use. The weapons were small and lightweight, with a large handle, even longer clip and anther smaller handle near the front of the barrel to steady the aim. A scope traversed the length of the gun, starting thin, then broadening out towards the barrel. The sight was not a necessity for the Night-Vipers, as their powerful night vision goggles were covering the top halves of their faces, a small telescope jutting out from each one, bringing the otherwise pitch blackness of night into the eerie green haze of focus. A thin black helmet covered their heads, and in this environment, they were all but invisible. A large Night-Viper led the group, the man close to six and a half feet tall and tipping the scales near three hundred. Even not equipped with state of the art imaging equipment and an automatic weapon, he would have been quite intimidating. The group was operating under silent signals only and the large man at the lead commanded his four troops through the thickness of the forest. They were far enough from the shore so that they walked on dry land, and amazingly, the men tread through the thick underbrush, making barely a sound. They carefully pushed thin branches aside and skillfully ducked around the branches too thick to push aside, each man cradling his weapon with ease and assuredness. The front man halted suddenly and held up his hand, the signal having its effect immediately as every other man stopped short as well. He tapped the side of his head three times and the third man in line eased out and slipped up next to him. The Night-Viper crouched to one knee, and swiftly slung his backpack off of his shoulder, then whipped out a small instrument with a thin metal antenna protruding from the top. He held the instrument carefully in the palm of his hand and pressed a small button with his thumb. The antenna jerked and unfolded into a miniature radar dish, thin segmented metal unfolding from it like a steel peacock’s silver feathers. Keeping the dish still, he unhooked an unseen switch, then pulled a jack out from the bottom, a cord unfurling silently with it. With a soft click the Night-Viper inserted the jack, which was reminiscent of a stereo headphone jack, into the side of his thin fiberglass helmet. Immediately a luminescent Heads Up Display blinked into focus in his goggles. This little contraption had been the pride and joy of Destro, who eventually wanted all Night Vipers equipped with the portable radar system. A grid spread out inside the goggles of the Night-Viper and calculations immediately began processing inside the small box in his hand. Still keeping his eyes glued to the lit HUD inside the helmet, the soldier quickly tapped his skilled fingers over the small, but effective keyboard built into the small object. As the Night-Viper manually filtered out the background movement and wildlife noise, the HUD slowly focused in on the moving object just to the east of their current location. The target was located. The Night-Viper quickly relayed the coordinates to his leader via quick hand signals, and seconds later the portable radar was back in the backpack and the small group of night warfare experts were on the move again. The leader signaled the change from night vision to thermal readouts, hoping to hone in on the one object in the forest at a healthy 98.6 degrees. Even as they approached the location of the moving object, its heat read out still had not shown up. The Night-Viper Squad Leader looked around, feeling somewhat foolish and perplexed. With a quick hand signal, he ordered everyone to switch back to night vision and they did so, spreading out slightly to cover more ground. The leader branched out first, wading thick into a bunch of dark trees. The next two wandered off slightly to the right, the radar operator walked off to the left, the one holding up the rear dropping back to cover their path. Quite suddenly, as soon as the team had separated, a blur of movement caught his eye. The rear guard twisted quickly, trying to follow it, but it disappeared. He lifted the walkie-talkie to his facemask, but halted, remembering the order for radio silence. He thought better of it and pressed the talk button, but too little, too late. A thick, bare arm wrapped tightly around his throat and pulled fiercely, yanking him from his feet. He felt himself tumbling backwards, his night vision goggles spiraling through the air only feet away. Those feet had might as well been miles as he felt the air blasting from his struggling lungs, as his legs quivered under his weight. Coughing haggardly, he cursed himself under his breath as the twisted angry face bent over him before he passed out.

"One down," the voice hissed as it lay the unconscious Night Viper on the wet surface of the jungle floor and proceeded forward, crouched low to the ground. He was a large, broad monster of a man, but moved with the swiftness of a predator, born and raised in these very jungles. His muscles meshed together and moved with an uncanny fluidity, almost more jungle cat than man. The hunter’s twin white, pupiless eyes seared through the cool night air, scoping for his next prey. He jerked his head one way, then the next, stood still for a second, then whipped to his right and seemed to vanish into the forest.

"Night Viper Squad Leader…status report, please," the man in the blue jacket growled into his communicator clutched in a tight brown-gloved hand. His short black hair was cropped just above his eyes, which were narrow slits. "Respond."

"Squad Leader here," the voice crackled from the walkie-talkie. "I thought you wanted radio silence, sir."

"I did. You just broke it, Squad Leader. Pay more attention next time! Aleph out." The man sneered and clipped the radio back onto his belt, scowling. "Buffoon," he hissed, shaking his head. "How he ever made Squad Leader, I’ll never know."

"Jerk." The Night Viper Squad Leader hooked his own radio back where it belonged, his eyes narrowing into thin lines of anger. His green visor was pointed up into the air, revealing his irritated face underneath, which he had had to reveal to speak to the organizer of this little practice session. The Night Viper let his submachine gun dangle on its leather strap at his side and pulled the bolt action rifle from its home on his right thigh. "This whole little fiasco was his idea, anyway," he growled, squinting through the scope perched on the shotgun. His breath drew suddenly in as the blue green blur rippled across the crosshairs, then melted into the shadows. "What the--?" the Night Viper asked to no one in particular, but then realized he was in trouble. With a swift motion, his visor slid down over his face and he transferred power to the thermal imaging. There was nothing. His heart pounded in his chest as he turned carefully, the shotgun tightly grasped in his black leather gloves. He had seen motion…motion with a human heat signature, and bigger than any animal out here. Was it him? He wasn’t sure, but secretly hoped not. Although his mission was to take the guy out, and if he succeeded, maybe Aleph would show some respect. Night Viper Sampson had been with Cobra from near the beginning. Starting out as a lowly communications officer before joining the Eel corps, and finally the elite of Cobra Troopers, the Night Viper squad. It had been a long hard road to Night Viper Squad Leader, and he was more than a little resentful at Aleph’s holier than thou attitude. He had just shown up, brought in from the Night Creeper guild, and suddenly he was a troop commander. Some things in life were just not fair. Sampson continued his tight circle of patrol, his visor humming silently as he searched for the elusive signature.

"Where are you, Z—?"

"Closer than you think." The voice hissed from just behind, and Sampson had to hold himself from shouting out loud. He spun, lifting the weapon, and scowled behind the helmet as his opponent moved in swiftly. Sampson was a very large man by any standard, but moved quickly, the rifle discharging in a loud, sharp *KRAKK*, but his enemy was already within his range of motion and the weapon was not even a challenge. He whipped his black gloved fist around in a tight arc, close to his large body and drove it deep into the Night Viper’s ribs. Sampson’s breath blasted out in a muffled gasp underneath the black mouthpiece that covered the lower part of his face. In another fluid motion the attacker twisted the other way, bringing his left fist up at a sharp angle. It caught the large Squad Leader under the jaw, breaking loose the mouthpiece and sending his green visor spiraling through the night air. His shotgun flew from his grasp and dark blood spewed from the man’s mouth as he stumbled back, his vision already clouding. But he was a large, well built man, and planted his foot and didn’t fall, his face twisting to an almost happy sneer, now visible with the face mask broken and laying scattered on the jungle floor. His knuckles cracked as he stepped forward, ready to take on this challenge. The other man stood before him, his arms planted on his hips, a smile skimming over his features as well. His bone white eyes took in his opponent and he twisted his neck, snapping some vertebrae back into place, his brown cowl swaying with the motion. The Night Viper charged in, whipping his fist forward in an arrow straight line, but the other man jerked swiftly out of the way and brought his knee up, blasting it into Sampson’s gut. The force threw the Squad Leader from his feet and he tumbled to the ground, but rolled and was instantly back on his feet, even as the mysterious man charged back at him. The Night Viper neatly parried two thrown punches, dodged a vicious roundhouse kick, then drove his own leg forward, crashing it into his enemy’s Plexiglas like chest plate. It collided with a dull *CLONG* and sent the man stumbling backwards, but he didn’t fall. He drove his foot back into the dirt and halted his momentum swiftly, digging a shallow trench in the soft dirt ground. In this light, the shadows danced over the man, parts of his body actually melting into them before becoming solid again once the shadow vacated. His face was drowned in darkness, his strangely patterned face paint drawing the black in and making his features nearly indiscernible in the dark night. The only things that showed on his shadowed face were the two narrow, white eyes with no pupils. Just shimmering bright pools, boring deep into the soul of the man he now fought. Another thing was visible as he stepped forward, somewhat out of the shadows. His toothy, broad grin.

"Well fought, Sampson…let’s see what else you have." He ran forward, his eyes still shining like beacons in the night. The Night Viper stepped to the side and pushed the other man aside with a chop of his hands, but his opponent was too quick and planted his feet, then changed directions, coming right at him. Suddenly the man hit him full on in a vicious football tackle, and he felt himself being thrown roughly to the hard ground, and then flipped over and slammed back first. The grinning man now stood above him, his fist cocked, with Sampson pinned underneath his forceful grip.

"You lose—"

Suddenly white light flashed from what seemed like all directions at once, flooding the small clearing which had become a ring of sorts for these two men. It struck the crouching man with an almost physical force, making him wince.

"No, you lose," Sampson said, grinning now himself. Two Night Vipers appeared from the trees, their submachine gun mounted tac-lights shining brightly into the eyes of their prey. The white-eyed man in the dark cowl remained crouched over the sprawled Night Viper, his head twisted up towards the other two men who had just entered the equation.

"Trap is sprung, Zartan," one of them said, a little too eagerly for the shape shifter’s liking.

Zartan smiled thinly, his white eyes narrowing. "Didn’t Sampson here ever teach you?" he asked, shifting his weight ever so slightly. "Shoot first, ask questions later. The game’s not up until I’m ‘dead’!" he threw himself forward with lightning like speed, covering the ten feet to the Night Vipers in milliseconds. They shifted their aim, stumbling slightly as Zartan honed in on them, already too close for weapons use. His arms shot out and latched onto one of the Night Viper’s arms, which still clutched the automatic weapon. As he jerked down, tossing the night expert from his feet, he spun and his left leg shot out in a solid straight back kick, catching the second Night Viper square in the upper chest. He gasped and flew from his feet, then slammed onto the ground flat on his back, a few feet away from the other one, which was sprawled ungracefully on his stomach. Before they had even stopped moving, Zartan had disappeared into the forest.

"Blast!" Sampson shouted, plucking his weapon from the dirt. "On your feet, boys! We can’t let him get away now!" he charged into the woods, even without his facemask, his eyes were trained and adjusted to the inky blackness. He could hear the other two men spring up and join the chase close behind, trees rusting and boots thudding along the forest floor. The Night Vipers couldn’t afford stealth and silence at this point, their prey mere feet in front of them. The Squad Leader figured Zartan was thinking the same thing, as he could hear the frantic pounding of feet and thrashing of loose branches just ahead. The green leaves on the tress faded to a blur and the night sky was a vague background as the team of Night Vipers pounded through the brush, their breath coming in ragged, harsh gasps, and their legs pumping feverishly. Sampson drew his weapon in between inhales and pointed it at the rustling branches ahead of him, preparing to fire. Suddenly his foot struck something jutting from the ground; a thick, strangely shaped mound and he hurtled forward, shouting briskly. The weapon flew from his grip as his eyes grew wide, and he hit the ground, rolling clumsily, swearing all the way. With a defeated grunt and gasp, he picked himself up off the ground shaking his head. He stared up at the other two Night Vipers who stood uncertainly where he had fallen.

"What?" he demanded. "What are you waiting for? Continue pursuit!"

"Boss," one of them said softly, staring down at his feet. "You may want to see this." He pointed toward the ground where Sampson had tripped. There was an awkwardly shaped mound there, not a root as he had thought, but a definite form. A large form. Man-sized, in fact. The Night Viper Squad Leader leaped to his feet and strode over to the motionless lump that lay on the forest floor. When he had a good look, he drew back suddenly, taken quite aback, his eyes widening.

"My God," he whispered at the form on the ground. He’d recognized the uniform as soon as he’d jumped up, after all it was identical to the one he wore. It was a fellow Night Viper, but not a healthy one. He lay on the ground, face up, eyes wide and bulging, staring into the night sky. His goggles and facemask were tossed aside, lying a few feet away, and his green body armor was twinged red. A few streaks of blood ran across the bottom of his face, but it wasn’t dried yet. The kill was fresh. His hand was formed in a twisted clench, the portable radar tilting from his fingers and resting on the ground, the thin wire cord still attached to the helmet.

"He’s dead," Sampson said simply, not even bothering to check for a pulse. "Zartan went too far this time." He shook his head angrily.

"I didn’t do this," the voice came from the trees, a low hiss.

Sampson turned as he knelt down, and half noticed the green tint fading from his flesh, which had made him invisible against the trees.

"What?" the Night Viper asked, scrutinizing the shape shifter.

Zartan remained in a low crouch, studying the body. "I didn’t do this, Sampson. It wasn’t me."

"Look, we’re the only ones out here…"

"See this?" Zartan asked, sticking a finger at the neck of the dead radar operator.

"What about it?" Sampson asked, looking closely, but not too interested.

"A slit in the rubber suit under the body armor. Look." He stuck his fingers against the black clad neck of the dead trooper. They pressed into the rubber surface of the bodysuit underneath, and spread apart, spreading the black as well into a wide but smooth slash. There was no flesh visible underneath, only red gore, just barely starting to clot.

"So?"

"His throat was slit. I don’t have a knife on me, do I?"

The Night Viper squinted at him, not convinced.

Zartan huffed and stood straight, standing tall over even the other standing men. "I don’t have to explain myself to you," he snarled and started to walk away.

Sampson jumped to his feet and wrapped a strong grip around the metal shoulder pad of the shape shifter. "Where do you think you’re going?" he demanded.

Zartan turned only his head, his eyes drilling deep into the Night Viper Squad Leader, his mouth twisting into an angry growl. "Someone else is in my jungle, Sampson. I mean to find him." The look on Zartan’s face conveyed the meaning well enough and the Night Viper released instantly. With a swift dart, Zartan vanished, swallowed by the thick trees. The Night Viper shrugged, then turned to his compatriots. "All right, boys. Pick this guy up. We’ve got to tell Aleph what’s up." He didn’t want to, but was slightly relieved to have this little training exercise halted. They plucked the corpse from the ground and headed towards the treeline, unaware that another pair of eyes watched their every move.

The dark shroud of night had settled across the bare stretch of relative desert, the small military hospital the only illuminated building in the surrounding area. Lights shone from windows like curious square eyes with cloth shade lids pulled down halfway. In his room Stalker tossed and turned in fitful sleep that usually follows after a night of violence. Images danced in front of his closed eyes, familiar, yet mysterious floating, rippling, blossoming dream visions of a man put to bed with a healthy dose of medication. The young recruits’ pained faces warped and shimmered in his mind’s eye, the pained look of the youngest one as he was gunned down a lasting image. His mind tried hard to piece together the other scenes of that night…the explosions, flames and gunfire eroded almost every other image that he could gather together. His dream world was numerous clouds swirling together, and forming into a vague, metallic image. Something that Stalker should have recognized…should be remembering but couldn’t. The images of the guards joined this swirling mass and wound together as if sucked into a bizarre supernatural whirlpool in his dreams. The metallic object bubbled and rippled and spun, desperately trying to form itself into a comprehensible image as Stalker rolled over in his sleep. Vague features presented themselves on the metal surface…a small nose bubbled from the molten surface and formed a small silver knob on the ever-changing metal palette. Two small rectangles split from the surface and opened up into small slits. Eye slits. Two piercing eyes shot open from behind these slits as another rectangular shape morphed and twisted into a mouth, teeth bared and snarling. Stalker rolled back over, mumbling as a large orange explosion roared in his dream, obliterating the face. The yellow and orange faded, and the gray dream-clouds slowly drifted away and the two figures stood in the gaping hole blasted through the wall as clear as day. Both dressed in black leather, one male, and one female. She wore glasses and hair down to the small of her curved back, the man in a cold, hard, unyielding steel mask, a small whisper of gray smoke drifting from the rocket launcher on his wrist. Stalker’s eyes shot wide open with sudden revelation.

"Destro!" he shouted loudly in the empty room. He held a hand to his head, then whipped it around, desperately searching for the call button. Finding it, he slammed a clenched fist on it as hard as he could, pain searing through his shoulder even from such a simple movement. He sat up in bed, groaning slightly. "I remember…I remember everything," he mumbled softly to himself. A nurse quickly slipped through the door into the darkened room.

"Sergeant Wilkinson?" she asked. "Are you all right?"

Stalker was already up and out of bed. "Where’s your nearest phone? I need to make a long distance phone call…to Washington, D.C.!"

# CHAPTER TWO

**A SMALL VICTORY**

It was very early in the "War Room" as it was now being called, however the small room of computer banks and illuminated maps was fairly busy with activity for such an early hour. It was very quiet, with little speech, but rustling papers, tapping keys and flipping photographs permeated the air, giving it the atmosphere of dramatic urgency. Dial Tone carefully monitored the communications channels, making sure everything was still kosher with the upper brass lingering a few levels above their heads. They hadn’t exactly been kicked out of the War Room, but he was certain that if The Jugglers stumbled on to what was going on that they would be in trouble. It was an oversight he was sure, but the Joes were on borrowed time, and they needed all they could squeeze. Just to his right, along the slender metal counter, computer specialist Mainframe and electronics expert Blackout were frantically going through stacks of radar images. They had been secretly taken from the archives buried many feet below the surface in the underground labyrinth of tunnels and halls that made up the Top Secret branches of The Pentagon. Just another mild felony that if the Joes were caught they could be hung for. At the luminescent map half the room away, General Hawk, Duke and Falcon triangulated positions and studied data, trying to figure out the best possible course of action should action need to be taken. Hawk’s brow was furrowed, his eyes squinting. In his heart, he was doubtful that he could get anything authorized, but he wasn’t taking any chances, especially where Cobra was concerned. The small island hung there in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico mocking them, a light green grid spread out over it with coordinates displayed evenly across the map. Hawk studied the area, keyed in a suggested path of attack, which brought up a blinking green arrow leading across the gulf to the North shore of Cobra Island.

"Too frontal," Duke said simply. "They could spot us a mile away…we’d be toast before we hit land." He cracked his neck to one side and sighed. Their necessary rush to complete planning before they were robbed of the facilities had stolen much needed sleep from the upper echelon members of GI Joe.

"Agreed," replied Hawk, looking pensive. "But, that’s the point."

"Excuse me?" Duke looked at Hawk with question in his eyes.

"Just free associating, Sergeant…don’t mind me." He lowered his blonde hared head back to the map and squinted at it. Duke was pretty sure he caught a little familiar glimmer in his superior officer’s eyes.

"Got a plan, General?" he asked, a slight grin curling his lips. He planted his elbows on the edge of the map table and stared at his commanding officer.

"Remember, Duke," Hawk replied, returning the smile, "we’re not on this mission." He lowered his head again and Duke chuckled softly. Falcon witnessed the exchange and smiled himself as he studied the map table in front of him. Hawk groaned as he stood, shoving the metal folding chair back softly. It squeaked against the hard surface of the floor. The General was not wearing his familiar leather jacket at this hour in the morning, only an olive drab tank top and his regular camouflage pants. Duke wore his tan shirt and green pants, and Falcon was dressed as always in full forest camo. Hawk walked slowly across the room twisting his neck and trying to unlock some vertebrae.

"Blackout?" he asked, his voice booming across the small room. Blackout almost jumped out of his seat and spun around quickly.

"Yes, sir?" he asked quickly. His silver helmet lay on the floor by his chair, but his red quilted shirt and black pants were on and pressed smooth as usual.

"Any luck on those films?" he asked and gestured over to the photos. A small, silver microfilm viewer sat on a small empty space on the counter, with Mainframe hunched over it. Blackout sat at a computer monitor, his new imaging software fully installed and going to work on a file.

"Not yet, sir…we still have almost a year to go according to the photos." He grimaced, uncomfortable with the bad news he was bringing to Hawk’s attention. "If the Cobras were on that island, they were either in hiding, somehow knew the satellite schedule, or both."

Hawk sighed and placed his hands on his hips. "Continue on, Trooper…good work, so far, Blackout."

"Thank you, sir," he said, beaming with pride. He turned back around and resumed tapping on the computer. Hawk turned away, and started walking back towards the table.

"General Hawk?" the voice was slightly excited and came from behind. Hawk spun, hoping it was Mainframe or Blackout with some new information. It wasn’t, though. It was Dial Tone.

"Yes, Dial Tone?" he asked, walking closer.

"Phone for you, sir…collect from Nevada." He handed over the handset and Hawk scooped it up, confusion on his face.

"Hawk. Go ahead," he said simply.

"General! I thought I’d never get through to you!" The voice was quick and frantic, and only vaguely familiar behind the crackling static.

"Stalker?" Hawk asked, his face contorting into even more confusion. "Aren’t you on Top Secret Duty at Fort—"

"I was, sir. Until about thirty-six hours ago."

"What do you mean, Stalker?" Hawk asked. He had stopped walking and now just sort of paced back and forth, a stern look settling over his face.

"The fort, sir…it was hit."

"Hit? More details, Stalker…define ‘hit’."

All heads turned towards the General as he spoke calmly and evenly over the phone. His tone of voice indicated a far from normal conversation.

"Raided, sir."

Hawk halted all movement, his eyes prying open. "What?" His voice was somewhat louder than he had meant, and all eyes focused even tighter on the General.

"You heard me right, sir. The base got infiltrated and robbed clean of whatever it was they had there," Stalker spoke excitedly, eager to get out the information, which he had deemed of the utmost importance.

"I thought the base was empty? A diversion wasn’t it?" Hawk’s confused look returned, fighting off the stern glare that had been there.

"Well, apparently, the brass pulled a double switch on us. But there definitely was something there, and Cobra’s got it now."

Hawk’s eyes widened with the news. Every muscle in his body stopped; the silence in the small room was deafening. "Say that again, Stalker. I don’t think I heard you right."

"You heard me right, General. The base was raided by Cobra Night-Vipers." Stalker tried to calm himself down, speaking in rough, harsh whispers. "That’s not all sir. They were led by Chrome Dome himself, Destro."

"Are you sure?" The General felt this wave of pressure wash over him suddenly. Like everything was closing in at once. He barely had time to solve one problem when eight more were springing up from nowhere.

"That metal head is pretty tough to forget, Hawk. It was him. And The Baroness. Some other whacko was with them, too. Someone I didn’t recognize."

Hawk finally moved, pacing back and forth, the curled phone cord straining against the pull. His empty hand pressed firmly against the side of his head, which had quite unsurprisingly started to ache. "This just doesn’t make sense," he said slowly.

"Why not, General? This is right up Cobra’s alley."

"Yeah, but why---oh, wait! Stalker, you don’t know, do you?"

"What? Man, cut me some slack, Hawk…I’ve been in the hospital for a couple days."

Hawk drew a breath. "You don’t know? About The President?"

"The President! That’s right…there was some breaking news on that right before the attack came. What happened?"

"He’s dead, Stalker. Assassinated."

There was stunned silence at the other end. Seconds slowly ticked by, until Stalker said the only thing he could think to say. "Oh, man."

"By Cobra."

"What?" Stalker’s eyes grew wide. Thousands of miles away in a hospital bed in Nevada, he stood bolt upright, almost screaming into the phone. "They wouldn’t…how—"

"We’re working on that part, but our mission’s been shelved by the D.O.D."

"Unbelievable." Stalker shook his head in bewilderment. Just when thought he had the D.C. bureaucrats figured out, they pulled the rug out from under him.

"Your account of the raid would be helpful. Any idea what they took?" he signaled to Blackout who scooped up a small pad of paper and ran it over, swiftly handing it to the General.

"Man…what did that kid call them?" he asked to himself, putting his hand to his head. "Semi-conductors of some kind I think is what he said. It’s all Greek to me, Hawk."

"Try and remember Stalker," Hawk asked, jotting some notes down on the small pad of paper.

"I’m trying, sir…I’m pretty sure that was it. Semi-Conductors. Kid didn’t even know what they were being used for."

"He sounds pretty smart. Put him on, would you?" Hawk asked hooking his foot around the metal chair and dragging it to him. With a muffled sigh, he sat.

"No can do, Hawk…kid didn’t make it. Some other guys bought it, too." He sat back down, the realization hitting him once more. "I couldn’t do jack for them."

Hawk sighed again. "Don’t beat yourself up, Joe. One thing I’ve learned from the past thirty-six hours is you can’t possibly be everywhere at once."

"Yeah, I know…wait a minute. Did you say ‘thirty-six hours’?"

"Yeah, what about it, Stalker?" Hawk asked, his face curious.

"What time was The President taken out, General? What time exactly?"

"I’m not sure of the exact time, Stalker. In the neighborhood of twenty-one fifteen. Give or take. Why? Give me something to work with here."

"I’m just thinking…that attack was timed pretty near exactly when The President was hit. If that’s what our TV was reporting, anyway."

"Think they’re connected?" The General suddenly became very, very interested.

"Well, Destro was using Night-Vipers, so he’s obviously not out on his own again. It’s too much to be a coincidence, isn’t it? Two massive Cobra attacks, synchronized almost perfectly, a whole country apart?"

"All right, Stalker, you’ve got me interested. We need you here ASAP. What physical condition are you in?"

"I can walk and fire a weapon, if that’s what you mean."

"I’ll talk to the doctor, and get you medical clearance. When can you be here?"

"There’s an Air Force base ten miles away. Set me up a ride, and I’ll be there as soon as the fighter jock can get me there."

"All right, Stalker," Hawk said, his face a mixture of nervous anticipation and determination. Good job, troop."

"This is bad, isn’t it, Hawk?" Stalker asked just as he hung up the phone.

Hawk sighed and closed his eyes tightly. "Couldn’t be much worse, Stalker. Couldn’t be much worse."

Cobra Commander was livid. His eyes flared beneath the waving swath of royal blue hood and his muscles strained underneath the usually baggy cloth. His back was rigid, his fists clenched and his feet stomped loudly on the hard floor as he paced back and forth in the confines of the Meeting Room. His velvet chair was turned over and a half-full glass of wine lay shattered and spilled on the floor, the liquid slowly dripping from the wall like a purple bloodstain.

"How long has he been here?" he demanded, still pacing. Destro stood stock still, his face expressionless under the beryllium. Zartan had left the room mere moments before, after breaking the news to his Commander.

"Hard to say. It would only be an educated—"

"How LONG?" it was a shout now.

"At least twenty-four hours. Quite possibly more." His voice was even and not intimidated by his Commander’s violent outburst.

"How? How was he not detected?" he halted and turned to his second in command, his eyes boring a hole through the steel plated face.

"We are work—"

"Work harder!" he screamed, his eyes now accusing. Destro did not back down. "Who was the victim?" the Commander asked, calming down slightly.

"One of the radar operators for our Night Viper squad. They were on a routine training mission trying to ‘hunt’ Zartan. Apparently Zartan tried to uncover our intruder, but was unable to do so."

"Zartan is not the issue here!" Cobra Commander slammed an angry fist on the oak table. The room was empty except for the two men, and violent tension hang in the air like a thick, early morning fog. "I want Techno-Vipers and Cyber-Vipers combing every inch of that swamp! I want that hole in our radar found and I want it plugged!"

"I’ve already dispatched two teams, Commander. However, I wouldn’t plan on finding any. This man is a sneak-troop plain and simple. All shell casings or traces are likely produced from neutral countries." This little event has plausible deniability written all over it."

Cobra Commander was almost fully calm now and stood still, his face wrinkled into a pensive gaze.

"Should we postpone the final phase, Commander?"

"No. I think this little operation may work to our advantage, believe it or not."

Destro appeared confused. "How so, Commander? This man is most likely American. As soon as he makes his report, the island will be compromised."

"You are a brilliant man and able strategist, Destro." Cobra Commander actually smiled slightly at his comrade. "You are too honorable, though. The specifics of political wrangling escape you."

Destro cocked his head slightly and crossed his arms over his broad, leather-clad chest. "You would be surprised, Commander. Try me."

"This is an election year. I highly doubt that the Vice-President wants anything foul smelling sticking to him this close to November. I doubt he’ll even admit to sending someone in. I have a feeling that whatever happened here tonight is lost and forgotten." His eyes wandered slightly, leaving Destro to only imagine how he could be so certain of this fact.

"Are you willing to risk the entire mission on that assumption, Commander?"

The Commander crossed his arms and leaned against the thick oak table, smiling suddenly. "What was it that John F. Kennedy said, Destro? ‘There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction.’ The mission proceeds as planned."

"Understood, Commander."

The trees rustled just slightly, as if only a light breeze was snaking through the leaves. No footsteps were audible, just the light wind tossing tree branches back and forth, meshing right in with the regular jungle noise. But suddenly, there he was, dressed in dark forest camouflage and wearing a black flack vest. A helmet was pulled tightly over his head, leaves assorted over the top of it to mask it with the rest of the jungle. He was barely visible, as if the jungle itself were moving slightly, smoothly and skillfully. Looking around, he dropped down into a low crouch and whipped his large black backpack from his back, resting it on the soft ground in front of him. He let his Uzi machine- gun hang from a leather strap slung over his shoulder and his bare arms adjusted the pack, then plucked off the handset that was set into the top. His eyes scanned the communications device, still half convinced that it wouldn’t work. It was supposed to be directly linked to an orbiting satellite used only for this purpose. Testing the device was but one small part of the elaborate mission he was on here on Cobra Island. With dancing fingers, he keyed in the specific access code, then placed the headset to his ear, listening carefully. As the line buzzed in his ear, he stood slightly from the crouch and circled around the small clearing, making sure that he was alone. This man’s senses were honed from decades of special forces work, and he trusted them implicitly; more than he trusted the fallible technology that so many of the modern day special forces operatives now depended on. He heard no one and nothing, and if he didn’t hear it, it wasn’t there. That was how much he believed in the strength of his own senses. The line clicked in his ear and an unfamiliar voice spoke.

"This is Home Base, go ahead."

The man’s eyes glanced over to the phone with mild annoyance. "Who is this?" he demanded in a low, but harsh whisper.

"Agent Wilkens, troop. Talk to me."

"I’m calling for General Abernathy. If I wanted to talk to a spook, I’d have called Langley directly." His voice was still a whisper, but conveyed his anger perfectly.

"For your information, General Abernathy’s team has been shelved indefinitely. Anything you were going to tell him, you can tell me."

"I don’t think so." He began to hang up the phone, but the agent must have anticipated it and rose his voice.

"Wait!" he shouted, the shrill noise echoing in the jungle.

The crouching man yanked the phone back to his ear. "Listen you little twit! Do you know where I am? Another screech like that, and I could be a dead man."

"Then you would do well to tell me what you have to say." Back in Washington, Agent Wilkens leaned back in his swivel chair, a satisfied look on his face. "Look, soldier…the General is your superior officer, but my organization tells him what to do. By default that makes me your superior officer as well."

"I don’t have time for this," the man hissed. "I’ve almost been spotted once already, and had to take someone out. Before I could hide the body, a whole dang platoon of his buddies showed up, so now the whole island knows I’m here."

"Did you complete the mission?"

"Yeah, I found what you’re looking for, buddy. The SEAL team was taken out, but there may be one of them still alive and held pris—"

"Good job, soldier. Hang tight, and we’ll get you an evac."

"Hang tight? I’m a walking bull’s-eye out here! Give me General Abernathy."

"Negative. After our little conversation here, the satellite will be monitored. You are not to try and contact the General again. He no longer has clearance for material of this sensitive a nature, understood?"

The man shook his head. Washington political crap made him want to puke. "Listen, kid," he said in his still low whisper. "If you don’t want me to call Hawk, then fine, I won’t. But if you want the info I’ve got, it’s gonna take someone with a lot more pull than you!"

"Listen here…"

"No, you listen, punk! I was on hairy ops before you were outta diapers! I’ll be damned if I’m going to take orders from a wet behind the ears kid who got his job because Daddy’s a friend of The President." The man sighed and slammed the headset back into its cradle, imbedded in the top of the pack. "Great, just great," he huffed, pulling the backpack back onto his arced back. He clutched the Uzi and stood, glaring out into the forest. "On my own again as usual." He crouched and darted, melting into the thick trees.

The day had passed, but the room seemed identical. Hawk glanced at his watch impatiently and paced about the small section of the room, just in front of the map table. The same men still inhabited the War Room, although they had come and gone throughout the day for rest and regaining of sanity.

"Waiting for something, General?" Duke asked, noticing Hawk’s frantic movements. Hawk halted for a moment.

"Just waiting for Stalker to show. Should be here soon."

"Did you tell the Joint Chiefs about Stalker’s report?" Falcon asked this time, walking over to join the conversation.

"Yeah. Circumstantial evidence according to them. Not enough to go on. We’re back to square one." The three men turned and hunched back over the map table. Numerous green dashes and red lines spread out over the electronic representation of the Gulf of Mexico, each one hitting the island at a different spot.

"No disrespect intended, General," Falcon said, turning to face his superior officer, "but if we’re on the bench, why bother with this planning session?"

Hawk stood and crossed his arms. "Lieutenant, Cobra is planning something. I have no doubt in my mind about that. We have to be ready at a moment’s notice when they strike. The D.O.D. will learn the error of their ways the hard way, and as usual, we have to be there to pick up the pieces."

"General Hawk!" Dial Tone jumped from his seat and shouted to the General. Hawk turned, nervous about the worried tone in his voice.

"I just intercepted a squawk from the brass hats. They’re sending a tech team down to the War Room to shut us down!"

"What?" Hawk shouted and stormed over to the computer banks. "Of all the—what terrible timing!" He whipped his head over to Mainframe and Blackout. "Please tell me you’ve got something!"

"Nothing yet, sir. We’re down to the last few weeks. If there’s anything here, we’ll find it within the hour," Mainframe was almost pleading.

"We don’t have an hour!" Hawk spun back around just as the door slid open. "Keep working! I’ll delay them," he whispered over to the technological team of GI Joe. Agent Wilkens stormed into the room first, closely followed by numerous men in full camouflage and a scattering of other men in black.

"Play time’s over, General," he said simply. "You won’t be needing usage of this room any more." He cast a look towards the men walking in behind him. "Shut it down boys. All of it."

"Hold on just one minute, Agent!" Hawk shouted stomping up towards the man dressed in the suit.

"You don’t have the authorization to order me to do anything! Stand aside…"

"GI Joe or not I still have two stars on my shoulder, Wilkens! What rank do you have? Or did daddy pull some strings to get you your job?" Hawk was face to face with the Agent now, their breath almost mingling together.

"Arrest this man!" Wilkens shouted to the men behind him. They started to advance.

"You’re going to let this paper-pusher tell you what to do?" Hawk demanded, now turning his attention to the advancing guards. "I am a Brigadier General! I am pulling rank and ordering you all to stand down!" The guards immediately halted.

"No, you fools! You answer to me or no one, understood?" Wilkens turned around and suddenly found himself face to barrel with a pair of automatic weapons. Duke and Falcon stood rigid, machineguns in their hands, confiscated from the two men in the rear.

"I don’t think these guys are arresting anyone, Agent Wilkens," Falcon sneered, the M-16 solid and foreboding in his grasp. The agent practically trembled with rage.

"There will be Court Martials for this!" He spun back to Hawk. "Call off your little p—"

"Uhhh…I hate to interrupt—" the voice came from behind Hawk, and he turned, Wilkens glaring over his shoulder. Mainframe and Blackout stood in front of the computer monitor, unsure looks on their faces.

"What is it, Mainframe?" Hawk asked eagerly and stepped forward. Wilkens attempted to follow.

"Bad idea, secret agent man," Duke said and motioned with his rifle. The man in black halted, but watched intently. Hawk stood in front of the monitor and looked, his arms crossed over his large chest. The satellite photo was loaded on the screen; the date read approximately one week ago. It was near dawn, so the clouds were parting and the light was clear. It was a simple shot, a little bit low on the angle, but it was a clear crisp picture of the central area of Cobra Island. The ravaged buildings that once made up the Cobra Command Headquarters still lay broken and smashed on the dirt. The sand was unmarked, and the island appeared, as it always did, empty.

"I hope there’s more than this," Hawk said, growing slightly perturbed.

"There had better be much more, Abernathy! Or you’ll be seeing Leavenworth from the inside!" Wilkens growled menacingly. Hawk made no motion and appeared to be deaf to the Agent’s threats.

"Well, the angle on the satellite here is lower than usual. There was an orbital malfunction and it drooped a little bit on its rotation. The error was corrected, so this is the only pass it made at this height." Mainframe spoke with simple intelligence, every eye in the room pasted to him. "See here?" he asked, pointing a thin baton to the upper quadrant of the picture. It was a building that looked tiny from space, but loomed far above the rest of the dilapidated edifices. It was the relatively newly built Cobra Citadel. Mainframe pressed a key and the photo zoomed in, the imaging program swiftly compensating and bringing everything back into focus. Now the building was more clearly presented; a tall concrete bunker like structure, the large grinning face of the Cobra engraved flawlessly into its cement hide. There was a tiny square near the top of the building, apparently a window. Mainframe swiftly tapped the key again, and again the photo zoomed even closer, then garbled the screen briefly, adjusted, and faded into clarity. The small square was definitely a window, the new morning sun glimmering gracefully from the glass surface, obscuring any outside view from this distance. Small rivers of cracks and missing chunks of concrete were visible at this distance, but Hawk could still not see the point here.

"What are you getting at, Mainframe?" he asked, leaning in closer. Mainframe smiled and pressed the key one more time. The irritated look on Hawk’s face melted into a satisfied grin. Almost a happy smirk. He might have laughed out loud had so much not been riding on this. The screen showed the window, a shot appearing to be only feet away, sun still glimmering off of the glass. But it was not the glass that interested General Hawk. Just behind the glass a figure was clearly standing, arms crossed, looking over his kingdom. The royal blue uniform, the wide-grinned red snake’s face on the chest; the ever present sash of blue hood dropping just below the chin. It was him. Hawk stood and smiled wider, satisfaction finally setting in.

"Dial Tone," he said simply, "get the Secretary of Defense on the phone please."

"You will do no such thing!" Wilkens shouted and lunged at the communications officer, fists clenched and mouth twisted into a hateful frown. His temper had apparently finally boiled over. Hawk stepped smoothly in the way, and wrapped a large arm around the width of the charging man’s chest, and shifted his weight seamlessly. The Agent sprawled over backward in a clumsy flop and struck the metal floor.

"You assaulted me!" he shouted, unbelieving. His sunglasses hung crooked from one ear, revealing his shocked, bulging eyes. Hawk grinned.

"Wilkens, we have almost ten men in here who saw you try to attack a communications officer. Just stay down and shut up or I’ll be forced to gag you." The men in camouflage couldn’t help but chuckle a little, secretly enjoying seeing this man in black getting pushed around. A mere moment passed and Dial Tone handed the phone to Hawk.

"Secretary of Defense, General," he said, quite pleased with himself for tracking him down so quickly.

"Mr. Secretary…General Abern—of course, sir…of course you know who it is. I just have some tidbits of information I would like to share with you, sir." Hawk walked over and extended a friendly hand to Wilkens, who took it and groaned as he was pulled to his feet.

"I know, sir…you are a very busy man. Yes, sir this is quite important. We have some further evidence of Cobra’s involvement in our little domestic problem. Yes, sir, I’m sure. Got the photograph right here in front of me." Hawk was smiling and walked over to the monitor, smiling even wider once he reached it. "I’m sorry to hear that, sir." Hawk said, sounding sincere. The look on his face told a different story. "Are you sure the Vice President won’t change his mind?" Even though taking the bad news, Hawk’s grin did not fade. "Well, sir…it’s just that I would hate for the press to get wind of this whole thing, you know?" He hesitated for a moment and stopped his walking. "I think the media would have a field day if they knew that the President’s killers were sitting pretty and we did nothing about it. Could be damaging to a presidential campaign, Mr. Secretary." Hawk smirked and began his walk again. "Blackmail? No, sir…that would be illegal. I’m just free-associating. Stating the facts, as unpleasant as they might be." He stopped, the smile broadening, his arms crossing over his chest. "You know, though…a thought does come to mind, sir. If we sent a small force in there…say about forty men? You know, a highly trained special missions group?" His face was now stern and serious, but his voice carried the slightest hint of sarcasm. "Maybe if we sent one in and drove them off the island…you know, that could help someone’s presidential campaign out immensely. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Secretary?" He winced slightly at the obvious rebuttal he was receiving on the other end. Yet, he continued. "I’m sure the Vice President would agree. Should I talk to him?" Hawk drew his head from the phone as the raised voice echoed from the earpiece. "No, sir…I know the Vice President is a busy, busy man. No, we really shouldn’t trouble him with this." He leaned on the bank of computers a pleasing, victorious look drifting over him. "What a great idea, sir. Yes, you really should be commended for coming up with that. I’m glad we had this little chat. Who, sir? Agent Wilkens? Why, yes, sir, he just happens to be here." Hawk smiled broadly and handed the phone to the well-dressed man. "Why, Mr. Wilkens…it’s for you."

"Yes, Mr. Secretary?" Wilkens asked kindly, flashing Hawk a look that would kill lesser men. "I’m not sure if that’s wise, sir…yes, sir. You do, sir." He hung his head slightly with every passing second. "Understood sir. Full reign, yes, sir." He dropped the phone from his ear and chuckled softly to himself. "Well done, General Abernathy. I hope you’re pleased." He walked over to the empty slot and set the phone back in its home. "Maybe you’ll rethink this little strategy when your neck deep in hostile fire on that island you plan on infiltrating. I hope your men succeed, General, because if you fail with the world watching, you might as well kiss your little group good-bye." He hissed the final words and spun quickly on his heels, then in a flash he was gone. Falcon and Duke returned the weapons to their owners, and after promises of no hard feelings, only Joes remained. Wilkens’ little outburst hadn’t dampened Hawk’s mood a bit.

"Blackout?" Hawk asked, turning to the new recruit.

"Yes, sir?" the young man stammered, jumping to his feet.

"Your software, right?" he asked, jamming a finger towards the computer screen.

"Yes, sir," Blackout replied, trying not to sound too proud.

Hawk smiled broadly. "Excellent job, soldier! Glad to have you on the team." Hawk extended his hand and Blackout took it eagerly and shook it.

"Thank you, sir! The pleasure is mine!"

Hawk pulled free and turned towards Dial Tone. "Operation: Mongoose is a go, men! Dial-Tone, you send out the signal…Mainframe, I want you and Blackout to do something for me."

"Whatever you say, sir," Mainframe replied.

"I want you two to scope out the national newspapers…Stalker ran into something funky in Nevada, and I want you guys to check it out."

"All right. What are we looking for?" Mainframe asked.

"Search for army bases…any strange break ins or thefts in the past week. Be thorough…no matter how small or inconsequential it might be, print out a report, all right?"

"You got it, General," Blackout said this time, and he and Mainframe sat down before respective computer screens.

One level below the War Room was a top-secret training area for the use of only the choicest group of soldiers. An indoor multi-purpose training center used to hone the skills of the Secret Service, and various black ops groups that the government didn’t want to have train in the open where they could possibly be sighted. The room was large, but not open, instead divided into numerous smaller rooms, each one with a specific branch of training. The door opened onto the shooting range, simply because that was the room used most often by the men, to improve and sharpen their firing skills. A hallway branched off to the right, which led to the close quarters combat area, one room for weapons training, and another room for hand to hand. A hallway even branched off from that one, and led to various vehicle simulations, from army jeeps to tanks, and airplanes and helicopters. It was truly an all-inclusive training center, and at the moment was being taken over by GI Joe. There was currently only one Joe in the facility, a man of average height and build. Slim, but with the required musculature to make it as a highly trained military operative. He was perhaps slimmer and even more conditioned than many of his teammates by necessity. He was the Light Infantryman; running and being in shape was not just optional, it was a must for his survival. He wore a deep forest green uniform with well placed blotches of black camouflage, creating a convincing forest pattern. He wore a leather harness over his slim chest, although at the moment, it lacked the usual hand grenades and other unpleasantness that would adorn it in combat. The harness crossed over his chest, then wrapped around both thighs, and connected in back, with a thick belt wrapped around the waist and a metal hook for rappelling jutting out just below the belly button. He wasn’t wearing his helmet or usual face paint, but he felt that wearing all of his gear was necessary, because he would be wearing it in actual combat. For now, he let his short cropped dirty blonde hair free, but once he entered the close quarters combat simulator, he would put it back on. For the firing range, he did not find the helmet a necessary addition. He had just arrived, and strolled over to the window on the right side of the room to requisition his weapon of choice, the AR-15, a short, but more than capable version of the popular M-16. It was capable of the same rate of fire and carried the same amount of ammo, but the AR-15 was a more compact weapon, and the soldier was willing to sacrifice a little stopping power for more ease in movement. The man behind the window looked at the soldier’s identification, and supplied him with the weapon and a clip of blanks. The firing range here was, like every other room, a simulation. Blanks were loaded in the gun to simulate the noise and kickback of the weapon, but instead of bullets, the rifle fired an invisible laser, which reacted with what was being shown on the full size view screen some meters away. Sometimes it was a hostage situation, sometimes an all out shootout, or sometimes, simply a shooting range with a bulls eye target two hundred meters away. It changed randomly, or it could be fixed depending on the user’s preference. The light infantryman was feeling frisky today, so he set it to random and placed the butt of the weapon firmly in his shoulder.

"Hit & Run!" the voice shouted from just behind the soldier. He froze, and turned slightly just as a thunderous *BANG!* Echoed throughout the room.

"You are dead. Please try again," an eerie computer voice said from the end of the room. Hit & Run shook his head and lowered the weapon.

"What’s up, Clutch?" he asked the familiar face who stood in the doorway. As always, the scraggly New Jersey native wore a permanent five o’clock shadow, and his thick black hair was unkempt and slightly messy.

"Me and the boys are going to O’Brien’s, my man! Wanna come?" he asked, jerking his head towards the door. Hit & Run peered around the corner at the two Joes who accompanied him. Leatherneck was just behind him dressed in green khakis and a black shirt with USMC proudly displayed on the chest. A camouflage jacket was tossed haphazardly over his right shoulder, and his mouth smirked underneath his moustache. Gung Ho stood just next to his fellow Marine, his shiny bald head reflecting comically under the bright florescent lights. He wore black khakis similar to Leatherneck’s and a black sweatshirt, which proudly proclaimed ‘Semper Fi’. Hit & Run smirked.

"Aren’t we on call, boys?" he asked, recognizing the name of the popular Irish bar where his teammates were heading.

"Yeah," said Leatherneck, stepping up slightly. "We’re just gonna chug some Yo Joe Cola and shoot some pool. C’mon, man…Clutch knows the owner, he’ll set us up good!"

"Thanks, but no thanks, guys. Bars…aren’t my scene," his voice lowered slightly and he turned back around.

"All right, man, your choice," Clutch said. "More pretty ladies for us!" He laughed at his own joke and the men walked off.

"Only pretty lady you’re going home to is momma, you grease monkey!" Gung-Ho chortled as they vanished slowly down the corridor. Hit & Run chuckled, but not a full laugh. His eyes turned deadly serious as the screen flicked on and two masked men popped into view, a poor innocent looking little girl trapped between them. The infantryman whipped his rifle into firing position and hauled back on the trigger, his grasp keeping the thrashing weapon well under control. A short burst plowed through the first man’s upper chest, and then he shifted and took the second one’s head off. He lowered the weapon and released his breath, satisfied with the result.

"Nice shooting, kid," the gruff whispery voice said behind him, and Hit & Run spun around.

"Man! What is this, ‘scare the guy with the weapon’ day?" Once he saw who stood there, though, he softened. "Beachhead. What’s up, bud?" he extended a hand and the Army Ranger grasped it and shook.

"Just checking up on you. How are you doing, kid?"

Hit & Run dropped the AR-15 against the wall. "Man, Beachhead…I’m over twenty-five now…I’m not a kid anymore." He rested his back against the wall.

"Hey, man…I still remember you as that youngblood assigned to me for his first mission. I remember thinking you were damn good for a new kid." Beachhead smiled, his face exposed with his green knit mask stuffed in his back pocket. He wore his black flak jacket with four spare clips fastened securely on his chest and his green and brown camouflage pants. His green sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

"Thanks," Hit & Run said, lowering his head. "After that, you kinda took me under your wing. That meant a lot to me, man. First time in my life that’s happened."

"Yeah, I know."

"You know? I didn’t think any of the guys knew."

"Hey, most of them don’t. Me, I check up on my boys." He smiled, which was unusual for Beachhead, usually the gruff, take no nonsense Army Ranger. Beachhead had become somewhat of a mentor to Hit & run, who joined the team at the tender age of nineteen. He was somewhat of a father figure to him, although he was not his senior by much more than ten or fifteen years. His gray hair made him appear far older than he was. "You think the guys would’ve asked you to a bar if they’d known about your parents?"

Hit & Run lowered his head, letting the uncomfortable silence sit for a minute. "No, probably not. Old news, though and it’s not a big deal, anyway." He shrugged his shoulders and stood up from the wall.

"Sure it is…hey, what’ve you been doing with your leave time, anyway?" Beachhead could sense the younger man’s uneasiness, and decided to change the subject.

"Not too much, really. Went back home, to Iowa…caught up with some friends. I started racing again." His face lightened up with that last comment.

"What do you race, kid?"

"Motocross mostly. It’s a big deal where I’m from. Probably because it’s the only thing to do in Sioux City."

"You good?"

"Yeah, pretty good. Got best times on the simulator," he said somewhat proudly, gesturing to the other room.

"Great."

"So what have you been doing, Beachhead?"

"Sorry, kid…I’m still working for Uncle Sugar…all ‘need to know’ basis kind of stuff." He slapped a firm hand on Hit & Run’s shoulder, brightening the mood somewhat.

"Hey, I understand."

"What’s say you and me go one on one in the hand to hand room, huh? I could use a tackling dummy."

Hit & Run laughed. "You’re on, old man! Let’s g—" their cheerful outbursts were cut silent by a brisk, shrill buzzing coming from both of their belts. Each man stopped fast and plucked a small square object from the belt and glared at it as the buzzing permeated the air. Their faces turned deadly serious and all laughter stopped.

"This is it," Hit & Run said, looking at his pager.

"This is the real deal, kid. You ready?" Beachhead asked, pulling the knit mask from his back pocket.

"Always." The two men dashed from the room and headed back up one level.

# CHAPTER THREE

**The Plan Revealed**

The signal had gone out, and the reaction was swift to say the least. Four doors down from the War Room sat the briefing center. It was a room of decent, but not large size, with the capacity to hold approximately one hundred people. Only a handful of hours had passed since the signal was sent out over pagers, securely fastened to every Joe currently on the roster. In fact, all of the Joes, save two, had been gathered here for over an hour, merely waiting for Agent Wilkens so the briefing could begin. The room was customizable, depending on the crowd or the mission parameters, and for this particular briefing, it was bare bones all the way. Chairs were lined up in five rows, with ten chairs per row. Each row was straight and even, a veritable arrow of metal folding chairs, one after another in the large quiver of the briefing room. Not all the chairs were occupied, but most were, and the men chattered nervously amongst themselves, waiting for Agent Wilkens, who had apparently decided to be fashionably late to this little get together. Hawk figured it gave him a warped sense of authority to have everyone waiting for him, but unfortunately, time was probably not on their side, and General Hawk could think of many more opportune times and ways for the Agent to demonstrate his supposed authority. Hawk paced slowly in front of the crowd, Stalker, Duke and Falcon milling around nearby. Stalker had arrived just after the signal had been sent, and filled Hawk in on the specifics of the action in Nevada, of which he remembered few. Stalker could now remember with clarity the major occurrences of the past thirty-six hours, and that was the important part. After what seemed like an eternity, Agent Wilkens walked through the metal door, and let it slide swiftly shut behind him with a low hiss. There were still four Joes not present. Law and Chuckles were still in the hospital and Hawk knew where the other two were, and what they were working on was most important. Wilkens walked up to the General and gestured towards him.

“Are we going to get this rolling, General?” he asked. “Time is of the essence.” Wilkens seemed to take great pleasure in this little barb and smirked as he took his place behind the man in the leather bomber jacket and camouflage pants. Hawk glared at the Agent from the corner of his eye and stepped into the light shining at the front of the room. There was no podium or stage, it was a plain flat floor and the wall behind him was covered in various maps. The Joes noticed with nervous anticipation that most of the maps covered the Gulf of Mexico and surrounding areas.

“All right, Gentlemen,” Hawk said clearly, his voice booming across the open air. It reverberated slightly off of the walls and Hawk figured it was due to the serious sound proofing that this room was no doubt equipped with. “I apologize for keeping you waiting, and I’m sorry if I ruined anyone’s evening,” he smirked and cast an eye towards Clutch, whose loud complaints had captured everyone’s attention earlier in the night. Clutch grinned back and shrugged nonchalantly.

“As I’m sure you all know,” the General continued, eager to get this meeting rolling, “that I wouldn’t call you all together here if it wasn’t important. There have been some important changes in the past twenty-four hours, and we want to make everyone aware of what is going down and when.” Curious speech and wondering gestures flowed through the crowd at the ambiguous statement, but Hawk didn’t wait for the talking to die down. “Stalker has just redlined over here from Nevada to fill us all in, so he has the floor.” The General stepped to one side, and Stalker stepped up in front of the crowd. His arm was wrapped in bandages and slung through a white cloth sling, hanging at his side. He wore his camouflage uniform and beret, and still looked intimidating in spite of the so-called handicap.

“Listen up, troops!” he barked, his all too familiar voice ringing comfortably in the Joes’ ears. “At about eighteen fifteen Pacific Time on Friday night, the base where I was stationed in the Nevada desert was raided by—“

Across the room, the metal door hissed open, breaking the surrounding silence, and throwing Stalker slightly off track. He glared at the door as Mainframe and Blackout walked through it, desperate looks on their faces. Mainframe cleared his throat uncomfortably, his eyes darting around. The Joes all turned and looked, and Stalker halted his speech.

“Sorry to interrupt Stalker,” he started, “but we have some…important news.” His face was contorted into a worried grimace, his mouth twitching just slightly. Stalker did not like the look on his face or the sound of his voice.

“All right, Mainframe. I know what Hawk had you working on. You say it’s important, it must be. It’s all yours,” Stalker said gracefully, and stepped away from the center of attention. Mainframe and Blackout stood before the group, their faces unchanged. Mainframe appeared more stoic and composed, but Blackout was sweating, and almost visibly shaken. This had something to do with the news they were delivering, but had more to do with the fact that he was standing at the center of attention.

“That was fast,” Hawk said to Mainframe, his brow furrowing.

“ Doesn’t take long when you know what to look for,” Mainframe replied simply. “Do you want to say anything?” he asked Blackout, who peered out into the crowd with quiet dread.

“N…no, thank you. Go ahead,” he sputtered, and walked away. A few scattered chuckles escaped the crowd of Joes, but Blackout couldn’t hear them.

Mainframe gathered his thoughts, not entirely sure where to begin. His eyes were puffy with black bags underneath them, his dark hair tossed and messy. He wore his familiar gray uniform, but it was rumpled and wrinkled, and no one even knew where his helmet was. He scratched his head slowly and finally decided to begin.

“I apologize in advance if I rush through this, but I am very afraid that time is our enemy. If we don’t act soon, then I fear it may be too late to do anything at all.” Mainframe lowered his head, thinking of the best way to proceed with his news. “I guess I’ll start from the beginning.” He cleared his throat again, and glared down at the ruffled sheets of paper clutched in his tight black-gloved fists. “Within the past week, there have been exactly twelve robberies or thefts from various military installations throughout North America. Up until thirty-six hours ago, they were very low- key and were only even noticed after an inspector did his regular weekly inventory. In each one, a small inconsequential item was taken. Nothing of any importance, and nothing to take note of. A small contraption here, a random device there…little things that wouldn’t be noticed. Even when the inspector registered the item as missing it was done with a shrug of the shoulders and little concern or worry.” Mainframe stopped for a second and cleared his throat nervously for the third time, looking out over the crowd. Every eye was fixed on him. “Well, that all changed Friday night, as Stalker was about to tell you. On Friday, there was an all out attack and raid on a military base in Nevada and a number of experimental prototypes were stolen. This certain raid drew a red flag from General Hawk, and he asked me and Blackout to research it, and we have, which is what brings us here today.” He stopped again and looked out to the crowd, this time more for effect than anything else. “Throughout our research and study over the past five hours we have deduced that all of these robberies and thefts were perpetrated by none other than Cobra.” A rippling of excited conversation flowed through the mass of Joes, each one looking curiously at another. “Stalker was an eye witness in Nevada, and—“

“Wait a minute!” Agent Wilkens shouted. “You’re blaming Cobra for everything now? What, did they shoot JFK, too?” he scowled. “Exactly when did they have time to raid these bases when they were planning the assassination of our president?”

“I will explain everything, Agent Wilkens,” Mainframe said somewhat sternly. He rolled his eyes slightly as he turned back towards the crowd. “About thirty-six hours ago, approximately twenty-one fifteen, Eastern Standard Time, an insanely well choreographed and executed series of events exploded throughout North America.” Mainframe pointed these facts out succinctly and to the point. “Within fifteen minutes, six military installations were outright raided by masked terrorists, each time, the group successfully made off with some impressive military hardware. No weapons, no explosives, but prototype machinery and fancy electronics. Similar to the first six thefts, but on a larger scale. These were raids that on a normal day w—“

“What does this have to do with the assassination of our president?” Wilkens demanded again, this time actually stepping up almost toe-to-toe with Mainframe.

“If you would have some patience, *Agent Wilkens* I will explain.” Mainframe was angered, and stepped closer to Wilkens, causing him to step back slightly. He cocked his head, composed himself, then turned back facing forward.

“Now, as I was saying…these raids that occurred Friday night would have normally become immediate front page material, had there not been a more pressing matter to occupy the media’s thoughts that night.” He said it simply and left the sentence hanging in the air to soak into everyone’s active imaginations. The Joes sat in stunned silence, all of a sudden realizing exactly what the computer expert was saying. It was baffling…unbelievable; yet, made perfect sense. Agent Wilkens was the only one who could express his doubt in words.

“What are you saying?” Wilkens again demanded. “Do you actually think Cobra assassinated the most powerful man in the free world as a *DISTRACTION?*” he spat out the last word with spite and rage, his voice unbelieving.

“You’ve obviously never dealt with Cobra before, Agent,” Hawk said this time, backing his man, as he should. “This is right up their alley.”

Wilkens stepped back, shaking his head.

“These events…these thefts…alone and isolated, they seem like nothing…alone, they are not newsworthy events, nothing to worry about.” Mainframe was continuing, attempting to shut out the angry Agent’s ranting. “But once you string them together…once you put the pieces together and connect them…it paints a very disturbing picture.” He finished the sentence and placed his hands on his hips, the papers still squeezed tightly between his fingers. “Blackout? Your turn, kid,” Mainframe said, gesturing towards the young man. Blackout’s heart raced, his sweat glands bubbling to the surface, but he quickly composed himself, just remembering what was at stake here.

“Thanks to the wonders of the Internet,” he started, taking a deep breath. “We were able to pull these news stories from small backwoods papers and military communications. We can only hope that we caught it in time. Mainframe and myself were able to get a running inventory of the missing items and hopefully deduce Cobra’s reasoning behind the numerous thefts and all out raids. Fortunately…or maybe unfortunately, we were successful, and are pretty sure what Cobra is up to.” He glanced down at his shoes, drawing in a deep breath, his heart thrashing in his tight chest.

“Well, spit it out, kid!” shouted Roadblock from the front row. He smirked as he said it, which eased Blackout’s nerves slightly.

Blackout smiled slightly, and lifted his head again, clearing his throat. “Almost all of the components that were taken from these facilities are key ingredients in something we are all now familiar with. The Frequency Wave Bomb, Code Name: SuperFreak.” That now said, he relaxed slightly as nervous chatter erupted through the room.

“Why make it when they can steal it?” Duke asked from the rear, echoing what was in the minds of many people in the room.

“Because, Sergeant,” Blackout continued, nodding respectively to Duke, “they are not merely duplicating the weapon, they are modifying it.” He said it with an informative certainty…as if a professor explaining a theory to his students.

“Certainly Cobra doesn’t have the capabilities to do that!” Wilkens shouted, disbelief showing in his voice.

“Agent Wilkens,” Hawk said simply, “Two agents of Cobra successfully cloned and grew a human being almost a full decade before the greatest scientists in the world cloned a *sheep.* If anyone can do it, Destro and Doctor Mindbender can.” This seemed to put Wilkens in his place and he shut his mouth obediently.

“When we first studied the data,” Blackout continued, “we were confused. One part didn’t quite fit. The prototype conductors taken from the base in Nevada stuck out like sore thumbs. They didn’t belong. Then, we dug deeper.” Blackout’s voice faded slightly and he cleared his throat again.

“You okay, kid?” Mainframe asked.

“Yeah,” he replied, smiling. He rubbed his hands on his red quilted shirt and lifted his eyes again. “As I’m sure you all know, the human body is made up of countless cells and mitochondria, each one giving off certain energy. The human body is not unlike a living generator, feeding off the energy in these cells and releasing it into the air. Humans are also not unlike machines, each one with a specific wavelength or frequency to them. Some people refer to these fields of energy as ‘auras’, but we take a more scientific approach.” He stood like a teacher before a biology class, and instinctively remembered back to his days at MIT, which seemed so long ago.

“We certainly did not gather everyone here for a science lesson, soldier,” Agent Wilkens sneered.

“No. Of course not.” Blackout cleared his throat again and continued. “Every human has a unique wavelength or frequency of energy naturally given off by the body, but they are subtly unique. At the core, however, every human gives off this same energy field, with very, very minute changes to differentiate between them.” He noticed the Joes growing slightly bored and confused with the conversation. Blackout decided it was probably time to wrap it up. “Those prototype conductors, when combined and tweaked together with the rest of the Wave Bomb, creates a weapon capable of using those wavelengths…those frequency waves to break down the human body at a molecular level.” He finished the sentence with emphasis, but noticed with chagrin that many of the Joes still did not completely follow. His thoughts wandered, suddenly realizing what frustration his instructors at MIT must have gone through teaching students who simply did not comprehend. Well, students without a 220 IQ, such as he had. “What this weapon is capable of,” he continued, “is the complete eradication of the human body. No damage to the surrounding areas. When this bomb hits, the human body simply ceases to exist…it evaporates completely, leaving nothing but a warm breeze.” He emphasized the ending again, this time more satisfied with the result. More nervous chatter and more anxious looks in the eyes.

“So you’re saying,” Hawk said, stepping up close, “that if Cobra were to detonate this weapon in a populated area, that all human life would be vaporized?”

“Yes, sir. Completely erased as if it never existed. Leaving all vehicles, power plants, banks and weapons—“

“--ripe for the picking.” Hawk finished Blackout’s sentence for him, but made it no less comfortable. “Why like this, though? Chemical weapons would have a similar effect.”

“Right, but this gets rid of that nasty clean up…plus, there are ways to combat chemicals… this weapon would be darn near unstoppable.” Blackout drew another nervous breath as he broke the news to the Joes.

Agent Wilkens was irate. “Well, exactly what are we supposed to do about *this*?” has asked, his face burning red.

“Well, there is some good news,” Blackout continued. “This particular bomb is not capable of ICBM launch. It must be dropped from a plane over the intended target. This produces a good window of opportunity.”

“So, we send the whole damn Air Force in and smoke that island to the bottom of the sea!” Wilkens was shouting. “Easy solution.”

“Not so easy, Agent Wilkens,” Hawk said, trying to calm the man down. “An engagement of that size would attract attention from here to the Gulf of Mexico. Cobra could launch a plane and get a bomb off well before our planes reach the island. Even detonation on coastal North America would be a catastrophe so tragic that—“

“—combined with the President’s recent demise, could throw the country in enough turmoil to enable a strike force to come in.” Duke finished Hawk’s sentence. “And, quite simply, take over.” All eyes were deadly serious, and faces grim.

Wilkens threw up his hands. “Ridiculous! We have air bases along the southern coast. It wouldn’t be—“ he was playing his role of devil’s advocate a little too well.

“And what if Cobra launches the plane south?” Hawk demanded. “Towards South America? There would still be thousands, maybe *millions* of casualties. That’s not a chance we can take, Agent.”

Agent Wilkens finally took the hint and backed off. “Then what do you propose, General Hawk?”

“I think you know.” Hawk glared at the Agent, and if Wilkens knew what Hawk was referring to, he showed no signs of comprehension. “This news requires immediate attention, but needs finesse,” Hawk continued. “A small covert group of operatives…maybe forty troops.” His eyes rose slightly, searching for understanding in the Agent’s face. “You know, Wilkens…a daring, highly trained special missions force? See what I’m getting at, Agent?” Hawk smiled slightly afterwards, satisfied that he got his point across.

“Very well, General. You’ve made your point. As of now GI Joe is in charge of this operation,” Wilkens conceded, already looking extremely unhappy about the decision.

General Hawk smiled with satisfaction. “Good. So this op is now under military control?” Hawk asked simply.

“Yes, General.”

“Just what I wanted to hear. Wilkens, you’re dismissed.” He brushed him off with a wave of his hand, and turned towards his troops.

“Excuse me?”

“This is under military control now, Agent. That makes *me* the commanding officer. You are dismissed, Agent. Return to your quarters.” Hawk smiled a satisfied grin.

“You can’t do that!”

“I am doing it, Wilkens…will you go peacefully or do I have to call the MP’s?”

Wilkens scowled deeply, a thick crevasse drilling a horizontal line through his forehead. “All right, General. Have it your way. But rest assured, the Secretary will hear of this.”

“Good…make sure not to leave anything out, Wilkens.” Hawk gestured towards the door and the Agent stormed out past the smirking gazes of the Joes. The door hissed open, then closed and laughter echoed throughout the room.

“Nicely done, Hawk!” shouted Dial Tone who sat in the second row. Whispering guffaws continued to rippled through until Hawk brought everything back into focus.

“All right, Joes. Laugh time is over as of now. From here on, things are serious. Deadly serious.” His eyes narrowed to slits as he glared down at the men before him. “Duke, Falcon and I have been preparing for this eventuality, and have already come up with our plan of attack. Time is of the utmost importance, so things need to get rolling ASAP.” He paced slowly and seriously back and forth in front of the crowd. “We have already sent the hardware requisitions up the chain of command, and should have all the necessary equipment in approximately six hours. Everyone here has *exactly* that much time to grab some rack time and meet for transport to the airfield in Langley. There will be one C-130 waiting for us, and it takes off in precisely six hours. Mission specifics will be given out in transport.” He stood rigid, all eyes focused directly on him. Brigadier General Clayton Abernathy. Commanding Officer of the most elite, highly trained Special Forces group in the known world. His heart swelled with pride, but his stern glare gave nothing away. The feeling was back in his blood now…and he welcomed it with open arms. “Now, this mission is going to be the definition of hairy,” he continued, spinning on his heel and staring down at the troops. *His* troops. It’ll be on a volunteer only basis, since I know you all have other things you could be doing.” Hawk stopped and stared out to his men, his arms crossed over his chest. “We may as well get this out of the way now. Volunteers?”

Every single hand in the room immediately shot to the ceiling with no hesitation or thought. Hawk smiled. “That’s what I like to see, Joes. If there ever was a job for GI Joe, this one is it. I’m proud to have you men under my command, and I know you’re actions within the next twenty-four hours will only serve to make me prouder. Let’s go, men…Yo Joe!”

“*YO JOE!!!*” the whole crowd responded with determined invigoration. Almost as a whole, the group of Joes jumped to their feet and rushed out the door, making for their temporary quarters for some good rest time before the mission. The crowd dispersed, leaving Hawk, Duke, and Falcon at the front of the room. Leatherneck was still standing by the chairs, looking curious, and began walking towards them. He was dressed in his camouflage BDU and Marine Corps hat, his black moustache trimmed tight under his nose.

“General Hawk, sir,” he said with great respect, saluting stiffly.

“What is it, Leatherneck?” Hawk asked, gesturing for Leatherneck to be at ease.

“Permission to speak candidly, sir,” he said, his eyes darting slightly.

“Of course,” Hawk replied, and glanced at Duke and Falcon. “Meet me in the War Room, gentlemen. You’re dismissed.”

“Sir.” Both men said nodding their heads, then saluted stiffly and left.

“Go ahead, Leatherneck,” Hawk said, pulling over a metal chair and sitting backwards in it. Leatherneck copied the motion and sat facing his General.

“I was just curious, sir. About Wet Suit. Where is he? I know he still goes on ops for the S.E.A.L.s…I was sure he’d be glad to back with the Joes.”

“Have you two been keeping in touch?” Hawk asked, trying to skirt the issue slightly.

“Yes, sir. Off and on. I haven’t spoken to him in quite a while now, though. Figured I’d see him here.”

“Leatherneck, there’s something you should know,” Hawk said quietly. Leatherneck’s face grew concerned. He’d heard speeches like this before.

“Deal me in, Hawk.” He said with iron certainty.

“A little over a week ago, just as the team was getting rolling again, Wet Suit’s S.E.A.L. Team was sent to Cobra Island for recon.”

Leatherneck grew uneasy. “One S.E.A.L. Team? Against Cobra Island?”

“At the time, Cobra Island was thought to be uninhabited. Obviously, intel was wrong again.”

“What happened, General?” Leatherneck asked eagerly.

“We lost communication with them shortly after the mission was a go. We don’t know exactly what happened, but in light of certain events, our hopes are…not up.” He lowered his head slightly, almost apologetically.

“They just got written off?” Leatherneck asked angrily.

“Well, I circumvented the brass and sent in a covert man myself…the specifics of which I can’t divulge. ‘Need to know’ and all that garbage.”

“One man?”

“Trust me, one was enough.”

“What did he find?”

“I don’t know. He is suddenly not responding to my communications. I think the Juggler’s suppressed him…won’t let him report to me.”

“I see,” Leatherneck said, lowering his head as well.

“I’m sorry, Leatherneck.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, sir,” the Marine said sternly, and stood up, quickly recomposing himself. “I make you a promise though, sir.”

“What is that, soldier?” Hawk asked, standing himself.

“One way or another, if Wet Suit is on that island…I’m bringing him home,” he said matter-of-factly, then stood, saluted, and turned and walked off leaving Hawk alone with his thoughts.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, troop,” Hawk replied, lowering his own salute.

The small corridor was dark, illuminated only be the small lamps adorning the walls, mostly for decoration, and not really useful in their purpose. The broad shouldered man halted by the slick, silver metal door, out of place in the corridor, which looked normal in all other ways.

“Destro…Greed, Ambition and Ruthlessness,” he said simply, the voice monitor picking up the key phrase and voice pattern, then whipping the door open with a whisper. Destro walked in, sighing heavily, glad just to be back in his quarters after the long night of working with Doctor Mindbender, a great task in and of itself. He halted suddenly, surprised at the figure who was seated at the foot of his bed, one leg bent crooked, pulling a long, black boot on over her slender calf.

“Baroness?” he asked, surprised. “Why aren’t you asleep? It’s late,” he said, unzipping the form fitting leather jacket and hanging it neatly in the closet, making sure the tall, red collar was not being crumpled.

“I was coming to check on your progress, my dear Destro,” she said in her unmistakable accent, standing and arching her back. She was fully dressed in her black leather outfit except for her gloves, which lay in a pile on the bed. Her hair was slightly messy from sleep and she walked over to the dresser on her side of the bed, where a round mirror sat.

“Ach…done finally,” Destro exclaimed. “If I’d had to spend one more minute with that bald headed ignoramus, I don’t know what I would’ve done.” He shook his head, still encased by the silver mask, which looked almost comical above his white tank top and leather pants. He was removing his gloves and wristbands and set them on a small shelf in the small closet. The Baroness chuckled and opened the top drawer, searching for her hairbrush.

“Are you going somewhere, my dear?” Destro asked, giving her a stern look.

“Yes…my nerves are…restless. I think the big day has got everyone on edge. I figured I’d go to the training center and get some target practice in.”

“Very well, dear.” Destro said, stretching.

The Baroness continued to fish through the drawer, and suddenly swore quietly.

“What?” Destro asked, walking over to her. The Baroness pulled out her hairbrush in one hand and a jumble of silver in the other that Destro couldn’t make out.

“Why do you still have these?” she asked stiffly and tossed the silver jumble at the large man. His hand shot nimbly out and scooped the items from the air, and then he opened his fist and lowered his head.

“Baroness,” he said softly, “it’s not something I can explain. A memento, I guess. Something to remember—“

“Why do you need to remember? It is old news, James,” she said angrily, plowing the brush through her thick dark hair.

“It’s an event I’m not proud of. I need something to remember it by.”

“Keeping it as a trophy would be more appro—“

“Anastasia!” Destro shouted angrily. The Baroness halted her brushing and glanced back, scowling under her glasses.

“I’m going to the firing range,” she said coldly and stood, brushing past her significant other. Destro wrapped a firm hand around her shoulder.

“Please try to understand, Baroness,” he said kindly, but firmly. She shook her head and left the room, the door slipping shut behind her. Destro sighed again, looking at the silver jumbled in his open palm. He sat on the bed, his head hanging.

“Am I still cut out for this?” he asked no one. “Killing for a cause…to achieve a goal is one thing. Senseless murder…” he stopped speaking and tossed the dog tags in his hand over to the dresser where they landed with a soft metal clunk. “It was an accident…why do I feel this way?” he shouted to the open air, his voice lost to the outside world in the soundproofed walls. He stood slowly, pressing the releases on his mask, then dropped it onto the bed. He scooped up the halves and leaned over the bed, hooking them onto the mannequin head that sat on the dresser on the other side. He ran a hand over his freshly shaven head and took a lingering look at the dog tags, the name face up and emblazoned in his self-conscious. *Hart-Burnett, Alison R; 853-71-6749; U.S. Army.*

“Lady Jaye,” he said in a whisper, “I am sorry.” He lay down on the soft bed, over the covers, his leather pants still on and let sleep wrap him in its warm embrace.

The six hours flew like seconds to all concerned and the Joes soon found themselves boarding a single C-130 Hercules and airborne. They had boarded the plane dressed in simple camouflage BDU’s so as not to attract attention, but as soon as the plane took to the air, they began peeling off the outer layers of uniform and revealing their own personal battle togs underneath. The cargo hold of the C-130 was bristling with nervous energy and anticipation as the Joes were embarking on their first mission together in over half a decade. The C-130 was not a quiet plane, the low rumbling of powerful engines and the muffled rush of air as its rounded nose pushed through the lower atmosphere permeated the cargo hold, but it did not cover the frantic chatter of the soldiers inside. The familiar groups all stood clustered together, remembering old times, planning strategies…declaring what they were personally going to do to Cobra Commander once they got there. Roadblock, Gung Ho, Leatherneck, Zap, Airtight, Alpine and Bazooka stood in one cluster, milling over their weapons and putting the finishing touches on their uniforms. Roadblock lifted his fifty caliber with seeming effortlessness and looked it over carefully.

“How ya doing, baby?” he asked, running a dark hand, covered by tight green gloves, over its metal surface.

“Good grief, Roadblock,” Gung Ho chortled, rolling his eyes underneath the green cloth wound over his forehead. “If you cared about your fellow Joes as much as you did for that dang gun, we’d have all the cover fire we needed!” his strong, gruff voice broke the tension well, just grazed with his trademark Cajun drawl.

“Don’t you worry, you bald jarhead!” Roadblock joked. “Me ‘n Betsy here will give you all the cover you need!” he grinned under his goatee and swung the gun around much like a smaller man would swing around a water pistol. His massive frame made the surrounding Joes look almost like children, and all of them approached the six-foot mark.

“Yeah, and whatever he can’t do with the .50, we’ll take care of with some well placed LAW and HEAT, my man!” Zap said confidently, his voice thick with his accent. He motioned to himself and Bazooka, who stood next to him, his arms crossed over his red football jersey. His helmet was on slightly crooked and a confident grin shone under his thick black moustache.

“And sure as heck, if anyone’s firing on ‘Zooka, I’ll be taking them down!” Alpine said smartly, cocking his small submachine gun, and wrapping a coil of rope over his right shoulder.

“Hey…the Marines are here! The rest of you boys can just go home!” Leatherneck shouted with a smile, patting Gung Ho on the shoulder.

“Yeah! Less of you sorry losers we have to *carry* home!” Gung Ho laughed out loud and the rest of the group joined in.

“Don’t worry, Gung Ho, you won’t have to carry me,” Airtight said happily, walking up to the burly Marine. “I don’t plan on getting shot.”

Gung Ho shook his head humorously. “I’ll tell ya, Airtight! The past six years hasn’t dulled your geekiness any!” he guffawed loudly and the rest of the group did the same. Airtight smirked.

“See if you say that when the Cobra’s are dropping mustard gas on us!” he smiled and patted the thick green helmet with built in gas mask that he was wearing. A few feet away, Shockwave, Low Light and Kevlar stood glancing over at the jovial group.

“They always this rowdy?” Kevlar asked, smiling slightly.

“Before a mission, yup,” Low Light replied. “Once things go down, though…joke’s over.” His voice became a gruff whisper as he said that, his eyes turning serious. He was wearing his brown uniform with dark gray vest and pants. His black helmet sat firmly on his head, but the night vision visor was aimed at the ceiling, and his face was open, his hair dyed black and his thick beard blending with the blotches of camouflage face paint already applied. No one had known the destination yet, so everyone came ready to go.

“Nervous, Kage?” Shockwave asked Kevlar, using his real name to ease tension a little.

“Little bit. Kind of out of my element here, aren’t I?”

“You volunteered, man,” Shockwave laughed. “That’ll teach you, huh?” They shared the laugh, but were both uneasy on the inside. It had been a while since this group was in full on combat, and they had trained vigorously over the past week, but the ultimate test was coming soon. Another group was anxiously talking amongst themselves near the edge of the cargo bay. Hit & Run, Repeater, Bullhorn, Outback, and Spearhead stood nervously, not conversing freely like their comrades.

“Anybody seen Beachhead?” Hit & Run asked the men surrounding him. Each one shook their head.

“Lot of people I don’t see here,” Repeater replied. “Duke, Falcon, Stalker…Ace. Lots of guys.”

Hit & Run shrugged his shoulders and was about to speak again when a voice much louder than his broke up his conversation.

“Ten- HUT!” the voice shouted and the men all spun. Roadblock had done the shouting and Hawk was now standing in front of his men in a darker leather jacket and an intricate jungle pattern on his camouflage pants. A green helmet covered his blonde hair, goggles strapped to them, now lifted above his eyes. His face was cold, mean, and deadly serious.

“Good morning, men…and woman,” he said, shooting a glance at Cover Girl who had joined them at the last minute, leaving her post as head Armorer at Fort Bradley. She wore her brown jacket and tan pants, her brown hair cropped neatly at her shoulders. Her face was as attractive as ever, though it seemed harder now that action was imminent. “I’m sure that most of you probably don’t know why you’re here or where exactly we are going, but it should come as no surprise. We are landing dead center in a nest of Cobras and bringing some big sticks to poke ‘em with!” he shouted triumphantly and was met with a chorus of confident cheers. “I’m sure a lot of you are also wondering where all the equipment is.” He gestured at the cargo bay, which was empty save for the Joes currently inside. “Well, all of these questions should be answered very soon. An air strike has been deemed too dangerous to attempt due to Cobra’s mysterious early warning system that is state of the art and currently hidden from view. For that reason, we must attack from the water and the land in a series of small strikes leading up to the all out assault on Cobra Central Command itself.” Hawk made all of his points with emphasis, his eyes stern and solid. “By the way, as of this morning, Cobra has officially made itself known, gentlemen! Just before we took off, our radar spotted ASP emplacements all along the north shore of the island and other Cobra vehicles beginning to assemble on the island. They are no longer playing dead!” His arms were crossed and his eyes narrow. “We must be prepared for a full out retaliation once we hit the beach, which we will be doing at approximately eighteen hundred hours this evening.” He signaled over to Mainframe, who picked up an easel with a map securely fastened to it and moved it over next to the General. The map was of the coast of Texas, a wide expansion of gulf water, and in the southeast quadrant, Cobra Island itself. Hawk pulled out a small metal pointer, and extended it with a quick motion. “As soon as we are able, we will be rendezvousing with the U.S.S. Flagg at this location,” he snapped the pointer to a spot in the gulf slightly off the coast of Texas. “Cutter, Torpedo, Topside and Admiral Keel Haul left early and will be there shortly, waiting. Equipment should be arriving there as I speak. We will be broken up into different teams for different purposes and will hopefully outsmart the snakes and overrun them with minimal difficulty.” The large plane shuddered slightly, but Hawk remained balanced, his voice still shouting. “The first group will be group Charlie, the water group. It will consist of Torpedo and Topside and two Devilfish fast attack watercraft. They will be the initial assault and their purpose is to knock off the dozen ASP emplacements on the north shore. If they fail, the mission fails, because if the ASPs are intact, they will chew up any approaching craft before they can do any damage.” He pointed this out with a final certainty, tapping his pointed against the map. “Group Beta will be the attack and armor group. Gung Ho will be piloting a water based Landing Craft Tank similar to the one we used for the attack on Cobra Island during the Cobra Civil War. It is a large, wide boat designed for carrying personnel and equipment over large expanses of water. On the LCT, there will be a Mauler, Wolverine, AWE Striker, and RAM Motorcycle. Bazooka will be operating the Mauler, Clutch the Striker, Cover Girl the Wolverine, and the RAM will be there as backup for running interference or rescue missions. Along with the vehicles, Spearhead, Alpine, Zap, Outback, Bullhorn, Repeater, Lifeline, Airtight, and Hit & Run will be there as foot soldiers.” Hawk signaled to each trooper as he said their name and each one nodded in understanding. “You guys will be the initial attack team. You will hit first and hit hard and pave the way for Group Alpha, the main assault force. Cutter will bring them in aboard the Whale. The group will be led by me and include Roadblock, Leatherneck, Low Light, Dial Tone, Blackout, Shockwave and Kevlar. We will follow the wedge that Group Beta pounds through the forces and will march straight through to Cobra Command.” Hawk finished speaking, but there was no chatter, no nervous speech…nothing but empty air hanging in the cargo bay. “One more thing, troops,” he said simply. “There are two more groups without which, this operation would not be possible.” Hawk folded up the pointer and placed his hands on his hips. “Group Delta is going to be known as the Strike Force, gentlemen. While we are slamming Cobra from the front with armor and shelling, a small group of Joes is going to sneak in the back way, through the swamp. They will have no air cover, no fire support, and nothing between them and the bullets except determination and raw guts. These boys are the sneakiest, the nastiest and the downright dirtiest, and they are depending on *us* to hold our own out there. Their job is to go in the back way and take out Cobra’s early warning system, which will allow the last group to make their air assault. Group Zeta should be arriving on the Flagg shortly before we do. They will be the boys pulling our fat out of the fire. Wild Bill and Airborne in Tomahawks, Slipstream in the Conquest X-30, with Ace and Ghostrider in Skystrikers.” All eyes bore down on the General, the heads nodding slightly as he spoke. “These boys are also depending on us to keep the landing zone clear and to keep the air as plane free as possible. I cannot express enough, the importance of our mission out there. We are responsible for everyone’s backs, including our own. Anyone that can’t handle pressure in here?” He asked loudly, his eyes scanning his crew. Not a single muscle moved, no arms, no fingers, not even an eyelid. “That’s what I thought. Anyone who isn’t ready can step out now.” He flashed a finger to the cargo door, which trembled slightly under the pressure of the wind resistance just outside. “All right, troops, who are we?” he shouted.

“*JOES, SIR!!!*”

“What do we do?”

“*KICK BUTT AND TAKE NAMES, SIR!!!*”

“Operation: Mongoose is up and running! Yo Joe!”

“*YO JOE!!!*”

# CHAPTER FOUR

**The Beginning of the End**

It was indeed the training center, although it took a few glances for Viper Satchel to recognize it. He glanced around in almost amazement through his one-way mirrored facemask, his eyes widening into almost white circular pools in which a small black raft floated aimlessly. Facial expressions were hidden well underneath the blue and silver helmet, but his body language was quite easily translated.

“Satchel…what’s the deal?” asked Viper Rhames. “What, you never been to a rally before?” he slapped his comrade hard on the blue sleeved shoulder and shook Satchel from his daze.

“Sure I have, Mitch…but this…man, this is something special!” his eyes were wide in awe struck wonder, soaking in the pomp and circumstance that surrounded the young man. The training center was familiar to every Viper and Trooper on Cobra Island, but over the past few hours it had been pretty much torn down and rebuilt in preparation for the upcoming speech. “What did they do with all the equipment?” he asked, noticing the absence of targets, mats on the floors and exercise machines.

“Dunno, Satchel. Maybe they transferred it somewhere else? You know, where they sent the vehicles and tanks and stuff.”

“Man, they never tell us Vipers nothin’!” Satchel griped, but his face was still locked in wonderment. The training room was a large, cavernous room, with impossibly high ceilings and a catwalk around the top of it, leading to an elevator. All training equipment and exercise gear was gone, which opened the room up tremendously. Red velvet flags saturated the empty ceiling now, arcing down and across in an awesome display of power and regal color. The flags were a deep, dark red with scorching, sharp silver Cobra emblems grinning their toothy grin from the slick surface of the expensive cloth. A dark blue curtain had been rigged over a make shift stage which sat on the far end of the room, almost directly under the entrance from the main hall. These curtains were as deep blue as the flags were red and the red symbol on them matched the silver for its luminescence. The collection of troops was staggering to say the least, practically an army of every type of Viper imaginable. Standing in rigid formation at the front of the crowd was a group of Crimson Guards, the highest ranking, and therefore the first ones in line. Behind them were smatterings of other Vipers, Alley-Vipers in orange and blue, yellow and black, and dark blue and gray. Frag Vipers and HEAT Vipers were mixed in, the tan and yellow blending in well with the red in front of them, and the many shades of Alley Viper next to them. Aero Vipers were next in line, standing proud in their dark gray and black suits, dark bandannas wrapped tightly around the top halves of their faces. Unlike the other Vipers present, none of them wore their helmets, as the thickness of the air in the room made wearing them uncomfortable. Night Vipers and Phantom Vipers were a mixed bag in the next bunch of standing figures, each one fully armed and equipped. The Night Vipers all had night vision goggles turned up, pointing at the ceiling to allow for better vision. Many more Vipers stood mixed in with the crowd, Techno Vipers, Cyber Vipers, Track Vipers, and the like. The formation spread out like a strangely colored quilt, all different uniforms somewhat meshing together into one cohesive unit, jumbling around independently of the other parts.

“Is this all the troops we have, Rhames?” Satchel asked, glancing around. “Seems like there should be more.”

“Yeah, there’s more than this, kid…probably on some missions somewhere. Wherever they are, there’s a good reason for it. The Commander ain’t no fool.”

“I wasn’t insinuating that!” the younger Viper snapped hastily. He didn’t want to be overheard talking bad about Cobra Commander. That was almost the same as signing your own death warrant. “Man, I wish I could get a promotion,” he continued, cranking his neck to see past the barrages of Vipers, Eels, Crimson Guards and the like in front of him. “Only guys behind us are the ‘Leaky Suit Brigade’,” he chuckled jerking his head back. A cluster of Toxo Vipers stood there patiently, helmets off and eyes glaring out from under their masks.

“Not far enough behind us if you ask me!” Rhames replied, laughing quietly. His chuckling stopped immediately when the loudspeakers crackled to life. The instantly recognizable tune of ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ blasted from them, greatly startling a number of men in the audience. The booming horns and raging drums flooded the room and bombarded the senses of all present in the large former training area. Slowly the blue curtains eased open and the Cobra High Command began their approach. Wild Weasel led the way, his deep red uniform on and tucked very neatly in every appropriate place. His flight helmet was on as well, and none of the troopers in the room could ever even remember him not wearing it. Scrap Iron exited the curtains after him, crossing over to stage right, immediately following the expert pilot. Zartan was the next to come out, dressed in his familiar chest plate and dark brown pants. He was an intimidating figure, his cowl flowing menacingly down around his jawbone, and his white irises piercing from under the black make up. Overlord came out following Zartan, his gold helmet shined to the point of perfection. The monocle was squeezed tightly in his right eye and his gold and red tunic, black pants and neatly shined boots emanated power and wealth. The first four men lined up in neat formation on stage right at a slight angle, to allow them all to see their leaders entrance. Doctor Mindbender was the next to appear, his bald head almost shining underneath the powerful lights. The cybernetic attachment on his eye clashed with the rest of his attire which appeared quite melodramatic and even a touch medieval. He wore two silver straps down the front of his bare chest, which strained over the metallic pacemaker component that had been installed there to regulate his fluctuating heartbeats. His body was handling its rejuvenation fairly well, but needed constant cyber-monitoring to remain fully functional. The electronic components were removable, but needed to be on often so that he could survive without them from time to time. He wore his same old purple pants and black boots with the purple trim and his long, velvet black cape spiraled around his slender frame like a king’s royal robe. The Baroness followed behind the evil scientist, the Vipers all trying hard not to let their eyes linger on her curved frame for too long. Clad as always in black leather, she walked with the grace befitting her name and took her place next to the bald man just in time to see her confidant Destro emerge. He wore his fancy outfit today, black leather like the other, but with raised gold shoulder pads and many more gold adornments. A gold sword and sheath bounced against his thick thigh as he walked, his red cape slipping down from one shoulder and dancing along the surface of the stage just behind him. His metal mask was gold today in honor of the ceremony, but was otherwise designed identically. The classical music continued to explode from the speakers set strategically around the large room, all others now in place and eagerly watching the entrance from behind the curtain. With a yank, the blue curtains flew open dramatically, revealing the man all came to see, flanked as always by his trusty Immortals, toting AK-47s. His uniform was dark black, the color of midnight, neatly pressed and trimmed to fit him perfectly. In its design, it was almost just like his more common blue uniform, but the darker color made it more regal. A thin silver braid rolled over his shoulder and wrapped back around, just touching the silver trim on flap of his uniform that fastened it together. His belt was jet-black leather with a sterling silver buckle and a deep red Cobra emblem etched into it. The pants matched the jacket and led down to spit shined almost shiny boots, which stood proudly and majestically upon the wooden parquet stage. A large red Cobra symbol grimaced from his broad chest just under where a blood red cape was attached by two silver snakehead clasps. The cape was a long, thick velvet material, and collected in a pool of cloth just behind his feet. He stood before his men, proud and royal, the living, breathing symbol of what these hundreds of men fought for; what they were willing to die for. The applause was deafening. Cobra Commander lifted his arms, his long leather gloved hands clenched into tight fists, the applause roaring to a fever pitch until he spread his fingers and motioned slightly downward and the noise eased on command.

“Greetings, future leaders of the free world!” he shouted triumphantly and the crowd noise exploded once again. A small microphone was clasped tightly to the lapel of his uniform and broadcast his voice all over the make shift arena. “Greetings, beloved followers…beloved friends…beloved BROTHERS!” he shouted happily, which reflected in earnest from the crowd. The noise died down once again and Cobra Commander composed himself. “Two decades we have spent…two decades spent chipping away. Pushing and pushing, only to be pushed farther backwards. Well, Cobra will be pushed no more! Starting today, Cobra pushes BACK!” he emphasized the sentence with a dramatic thrust of his hand into the air. Applause once again roared to life. “Over the past years, Cobra has bided its time. Waiting for the right moment to lash out…to strike down the putrid capitalist state that works so hard to keep the working man down! Brothers, I cannot think of a better time to strike than now. The United States is reeling. Thanks to brothers Zartan, Firefly and Fred CXV Cobra has struck down their leader. The heart of the country!” as he finished the sentence, his eyes roamed until he picked up his daughter, crouched in the shadows off to the side of the stage. He had tried valiantly to get her in the public eye, to take some credit, but to no avail. He was slightly worried that his constant protection of her…keeping her secluded and away from danger had now had a lasting effect on his beloved Whisper. But she still did what she did with skill and precision, and that was all that really mattered. “Of course, they will be looking for retribution. Earlier today, Cobra officially made itself known to the general public of the world! Those watching CNN this afternoon saw a battalion of HISS Tanks, Stingers and ASPS setting up guard posts across the shores of our great nation. This will, without a doubt, rise the ire of our enemies, and force them into action.” The Commander was now calmer and stood at a wooden podium, his hands firmly pressed against its polished surface. A red velvet sash was draped over the front, a silver Cobra symbol glaring from it. The crowd was riveted to his every word, but showed some apprehension when their Commander admitted to a possible attack by the U.S. Military. Viper Satchel cast a worried look to the veteran next to him.

“We’re going to be attacked?” he asked nervously.

Rhames shrugged his shoulder. “Par for the course, Junior…didn’t they tell you that when you joined up?”

“W—well, I never thought we’d be in full scale battle.”

“Not willing to die for the cause, Satchel? If you’re not, you don’t belong here, kid.” Rhames said, a slight edge coming to his voice.

“Of course I am!” he shouted defensively. He turned and continued to listen.

“Now, my brothers…do not be bothered by this news. The Cobra force is much more advanced than the standard military equipment. Besides, we have the heart! We have the cause!” his voice rose, soon joined by a chorus of hundreds. “We have the WILL and the MEANS, my brothers!” both of his hands shot into the air, bringing the crowd to a fever pitch. He lowered his hands and became serious once again. “Now, some of you will be lost. Possibly many of you.” His voice was quieter now, but still stern and clear. “That is an unfortunate side effect of combat. But to die for the cause of Cobra is better than a thousand unfulfilled lifetimes! Those who make the greatest sacrifice shall adorn the monument to your achievements! The monument erected in Washington, D.C., after America is OURS!” His voice became suddenly lost in the overwhelming ocean of applause and shouts of glory. “The Americans fight because they have to…they are paid to. It is their job. We fight because it is our born destiny! It is what we were created for, what we were born for! We fight because we wish to fight and the strength and power of our will is greater than any bomb or bullets they can throw at us! One of us may fall, but ten others will take his place and fight MORE and HARDER to avenge his fallen brother. We are all powerful, my legions! All strong and unbeatable!” The voices rose to a shrill screech and the applause rocked the former training room.

“Commander!” the voice was loud and strong, coming from above and behind the hooded dictator. Up on the catwalk, coming down from the entrance. The applause jerked to a halt, stunned and shocked silence melting through the crowd.

Cobra Commander’s head thrust around angrily, his eyes slitted. “Who dares interrupt me?” Cobra Commander asked under his breath, making sure the microphone didn’t pick up his complaint. He glared up at the walkway, but calmed a bit when he saw Snakebite standing there, large and menacing, his shotgun gripped firmly in his right hand. The voice was metallic, but fierce and frantic.

“Something requires your immediate attention,” he said, then turned and walked out. Cobra Commander scowled under his hood.

“Destro,” he barked, pointing a finger at the gold masked man. “Come with me, let’s see what this is all about. Baroness, dismiss the meeting and send everyone to their posts!”

“Yes, Commander,” the Baroness replied, and plucked the microphone from Cobra Commander’s fingers.

“Man, how does that Snakebite guy rate?” Rhames harped. “Any of us talked to Cobra Commander like that, we’d be worm food.”

“I think even The Commander’s a little scared of that walking freak show,” Satchel said cautiously.

The Baroness’ voice roared angrily over the loudspeakers as Destro and Cobra Commander stepped into the elevator.

“How did you like my speech, Destro?” The Commander asked, beaming under his hood.

“Fine, Commander. But I see you left the part out about us leaving for our hidden fortress in South America while these men die saving a useless island.”

Cobra Commander cocked his head, regarding his second in command with distress. “Useless island, Destro? Hogwash! We still have many uses for Cobra Island, or I would not have invested all of that time and money into it. I just think we need to make ourselves a little…less visible for a while.”

“Agreed.”

“Has the main group of vehicles been transported by cargo submarine yet?”

“Yes, Commander. We have about one quarter of our full armament on the island. There are close to a thousand men already stationed in the Amazon base as well. Everything is proceeding as planned.”

“Excellent.” The elevator door hissed open and the two men walked out, across the catwalk and over to the entrance door. “I hope whatever this little problem is doesn’t throw a monkey wrench into our plans.”

“We shall see, Commander.” The door slid shut behind them, leaving the crowd under verbal attack by The Baroness.

Minutes later they entered the main Command Center, the large round room plastered with radar screens, computer and television monitors, the Commander’s throne, and a few dozen assorted Vipers maintaining everything. Two Crimson Guard Immortals immediately picked up their flank, somewhat surprised that their two fellow Immortals hadn’t followed. Snakebite stood hunched over the largest bank of radar screens, located on the left side of the room. A Tele Viper sat at a chair in front of the screen, punching keys and reconfiguring readings. Two Techno Vipers flanked Snakebite, watching over the radar readings and studying the results. Destro and Cobra Commander stormed over to the monitor.

“What is the meaning of this, Snakebite?” The Commander asked angrily. “You interrupted the rally.”

“I wouldn’t have if it wasn’t important, sir,” Snakebite growled in his typical metallic twinge. He pointed a metal, segmented finger at the screen in front of him. Destro walked over to it, his face curious under the mask.

“What are they?” he asked quickly, leaning down.

“What are what, Destro?” Cobra Commander asked, glaring down at the screen.

Destro drew in a breath and tried not to sound annoyed. “These little green dots, Commander.” He pointed to two tiny green blobs on the screen as they slid along towards the island.

“Well, what are they?” he asked.

“Tele-Viper?” Destro asked the blue clad communications trooper sitting at the monitor.

“Well, they are moving very fast and at a deliberate pace. Too fast and deliberate to be water life. The filters should cancel them out anyway, but sometimes…”

“I don’t want to hear what it’s not, Tele-Viper. I want to hear what it is.” Destro kneeled down and typed some information into the keyboard in front of the screen. “Hmm…too small to be conventional military gear. Most likely some rich man’s kids strayed too far from the yacht.” He stood and grumbled.

“That’s it?” Cobra Commander asked, irritated. “Are you sure?”

“Would you rather we launch a full scale aquatic assault on a hundred foot skimmer?” Destro asked, his annoyance matching his commander’s. “We could swarm out there with Morays and splatter spoiled brat all over the gulf, how about that?”

“No need to get testy, Destro,” Cobra Commander demanded.

“Hold up, sirs,” Tele-Viper said suddenly. “We just lost radar in the southwest quadrant.”

Stunned silence floated over the small group of men. Destro’s eyes widened slightly under his silver helmet.

“What?” Cobra Commander shouted.

“Calm down, Commander,” Destro said, placing a reassuring hand on his leader’s shoulder. “We have technological difficulties all the time. Probably some lava rock shifted loose inside the volcano. Just blocking the signal. Happens very often, Cobra Commander.” Destro studied the screen carefully. “Tele-Viper, get a crew of Techno and Cyber Vipers to the radar dish ASAP. Let’s make sure this is a fluke.”

Cobra Commander huffed loudly. “I don’t like this, Destro!”

“Commander, you yourself said that it would most likely take the military at least thirty-six hours to coordinate a well planned assault. We have plenty of time. Don’t let a few coincidences rattle you, it does no good for troop morale.”

“You are correct, Destro. Keep watch on things out here, I’m going to my quarters.”

“Very well.” Destro said, then waited for Cobra Commander to disappear down the hallway. “Tele-Viper,” he said softly. “Let’s increase security on that southwestern coast, hm? And tell those ASP gunners to keep a sharp eye out.”

“Are you uneasy, sir?”

“No…just cautious. I’m going to check the rest of the systems. Notify me the moment something of significance happens.”

“As you command.”

Destro strolled off across the room, leaving the Tele Viper alone with the strange readings on the radar.

The water was usually calm at this time of day, but the two speeding watercrafts broke the serenity with loud exuberance. The small orange speedboats blasted over the usually smooth surface of the water, ripping a jagged path through the gulf, and spraying white, foamy wake in all directions from under the hulls. The bows of both small boats were slightly upturned from wind resistance and the slapping of angry waves against the front of them. Such was the speed of these two crafts that they bounced over the water, skipping like large metal stones moving at incredible velocities. The world was peaceful and quiet this far out in the Gulf of Mexico, and besides the roaring engines of The Devilfish, it was quite unnaturally calm. The man in the lead boat was clad in a black and gray wetsuit clinging tightly to his muscular frame with a latex hood pulled up over his head, but leaving his face uncovered. He was of Hawaiian decent, his somewhat dark skin and wide features prominent against the plain colors of his wet suit. Wind and water smashed against his exposed face, but he loved it, relished in it even, and could think of nothing better to be doing than hurtling over the glassy surface at breakneck speed. A small headset wrapped around his head underneath the hood, a tiny microphone extending down over his mouth. Communication from mouth to ear would be difficult and almost inaudible over the roaring of the engines and the gulf water, so it was necessary to communicate by headset, even though the two boats were only feet apart. The second boat whipped over the water close behind the lead with a serious looking man manning the controls. He wore an off white helmet and had blonde hair and full beard. An orange life vest was strapped over his slender chest with the word ‘NAVY’ proudly scribed there. He wore a blue short-sleeved shirt underneath and off white drawstring pants. A white portable rocket launcher sat next to him on one side with a small submachine gun on the other. A similar headset was strapped over his head, the microphone in the same position as the leader’s.

“Topside to Torpedo…communications check, do you read?” the bearded man asked, his voice barking into the microphone.

“This is Torpedo, back at you, Topside. Crystal clear!”

“I am reading about one hundred klicks to the designated strike point. Does that jive with you?” Topside asked, tapping a finger against his portable radar screen in front of him.

“Affirmative, Topside. Any idea if we’ve been spotted?”

“Negative. I’m hoping we’re too small and quick, and may just slip under the radar, confused with ocean clutter.”

“We’ll know soon enough.” Torpedo adjusted the controls a little bit to optimize the angle of their path. The entire success of this mission depended on them, and that was some serious pressure. Luckily, Torpedo thrived in pressure situations, and was looking forward to clearing the path for his Joe buddies. He looked down at his legs extended in the deep canopy of The Devilfish. His spear gun lay just to his right, next to an MP5 equipped with a silencer and TAC light. Just to his left there were his gray flippers, diving mask and oxygen tank. A sudden voice in his ear brought him out of his momentary daze.

“I’ve got contact, Torpedo. Twenty klicks and closing fast.”

Torpedo looked at his radar screen and made some minor adjustments. A green blip appeared suddenly, moving at a steady pace, heading straight for them. He wasn’t sure what it was, but it was definitely larger than their Devilfish.

“Full stop, Topside.” The two Devilfish halted quickly and bobbed restlessly on the rippling surface of the ocean water. The wake quickly died down and left them sitting on the calm blue and green surface, with barely a sound in the air. Topside coasted next to Torpedo and turned off his mike.

“What do we have, ‘Pedo?” he asked.

“Something bigger than us and coming from Cobra Island. Do we really need to know anything else?”

“Guess not. What do we do?”

“Improvise. You have your diving gear with you?”

“Of course…in the storage compartment.”

“Good. Let’s suit up and get wet, we don’t have much time.”

“Status, Tele Viper?” Destro asked, strolling back over to the radar console.

“I sent a Moray to investigate like you asked, Destro. Just one, nothing threatening. He’s not there yet, but we should have an update within the hour.”

“Good. Any ideas what we’re dealing with here?”

“No…wait a minute!” he said suddenly, leaning in closer to the screen.

“What?” Destro asked.

“The blips…they just disappeared.”

“Really? Hmmm…this just confirms that there’s nothing to worry about out there.”

“How so?”

“Well, any type of military craft would still leave a heat signature even after the engine was shut off. They have more powerful engines, which require a longer cool down process. These must just be some random speedboats. Stopped to go fishing or something.”

“Are you certain?” Tele Viper turned and asked. “This is getting strange.”

“Have the Moray continue with its mission. That will tell us for sure. How are the Techno Vipers doing in the volcano?”

“No word yet. That quadrant is still black, though.”

“Very well. Keep me up to date, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

The hydrofoil buzzed through the water, its smooth gray underbelly even and foils closed. Water splashed and sprayed in a wide arc as it hummed through the clear water, tearing apart the serenity much like the Devilfish had done earlier. A small crew manned it, with one Lamprey at the controls and a single gray and red clad Eel sitting in the gun turret on top of the red canopy. It was a sleek, arrow like machine, cutting through water and air both with almost scalpel like precision. Wind swept around its pointed bow, as it sliced cleanly through the smooth water and hurtled towards its destination. The Lamprey wore his silver bodysuit and blue life vest with a matching round helmet. His large blue goggles peered down at the miniature radar built into the console, and a blue-gloved finger tapped it impatiently.

“Lost the signal!” he shouted up to the Eel. The man in the turret placed a hand firmly against the canopy and vaulted from it like a well-trained gymnast. He landed in a skillful crouch a few feet below and walked towards the driver. His gray helmet fit snug on his head, and he already wore his diving mask firmly over his mouth and nose. The thick gray wet suit matched the color of his helmet, except for the black forearms and the dark crimson stripe that ran down his chest, showing off a startling silver Cobra symbol proudly against it.

“Do you remember the heading, Lamprey Nineteen?” he asked, plucking up a spear gun that rested on the side of the cockpit.

“Of course. We will be there in moments. Take the copilot’s chair. I don’t think we’ll need the gun turret for anything.”

“Better to be safe than sorry.”

“We’re more than a match for anyone out here! We’re Eels, we rule the water!” he shouted and rose a triumphant hand. The Eel shouted in agreement and slapped his hand.

“Hold up a second,” the Lamprey said, staring out over the gulf. “We got something out there.” He walked over to a storage compartment inside the cockpit and pulled out a pair of binoculars. There was still a decent amount of sunlight, but evening was approaching and dusk would be arriving shortly.

“Should I man the turret?” The Eel asked, somewhat nervously.

“Negative,” Lamprey said, placing the goggles over his blue built in visor. “There are two of them out there. But they’re capsized by the looks of it.”

“Sunk?”

“No, the hulls are light enough to float. But the water would mask the readings.”

“Are they military?” the Eel asked, lifting his spear gun.

“They don’t match anything I’m familiar with. Too small…although, we’re still too far away to make an accurate judgment.” Lamprey dropped the goggles from his face and scratched his helmeted scalp. “Eel, take the controls and bring us in quick, but steady. Bring us around from the northeast.”

“You got it,” Eel four seventy-two replied and moved to the pilot’s seat. “Good thing I’m in that Lamprey training group!” The Hydrofoil picked up speed slightly and altered its heading to bring it around.

“Good. If there is anyone out there, I’d rather come in at an angle, instead of straight on. Less chance of ambush.”

“Understood, Nineteen.” As The Moray turned, it shot a foamy arc from its port side, and then a quick burst of speed launched it forward, leaving a trench-like wake dug into the wet surface of the water. It traveled a good distance, then cut to port and shot a similar wake the other direction, then once again hurtled forward.

“Good. Keep this heading, Four Seventy-Two,” Lamprey said calmly, the binoculars back up to his face. “Okay, we have two capsized watercraft. Gray hulls…look like small motor boats.” Lamprey squinted into the goggles. “Bring it closer, and reduce speed. The waves and turbulence are wrecking my field of vision.”

“All right,” The Eel replied and toned the thrust down, bringing the engine down to a dull roar. Lamprey gripped the binoculars that hung around his neck as The Moray coasted in, now mere meters from the overturned boats. He lifted them to his face and gasped.

“What?” asked the Eel.

The goggles dropped to the floor of the cockpit as Lamprey whirled towards his comrade. “Get on the radio now! These boats have torpedoes!” a frantic finger jabbed towards the boats, which clearly had two long cylindrical torpedoes mounted flush to the hulls, surrounded by the hulls themselves so as to be invisible from far away.

“Now, now…” said a voice behind them. “That would kind of negate the whole ‘covert’ part of this covert operation.”

The Lamprey spun, inhaling sharply just as the man in the black and gray wet suit vaulted smoothly over the edge of the Hydrofoil, dripping with gulf water.

The Lamprey swore loudly and quickly unstrapped the semi automatic pistol that was clutched by the blue leather holster on his right thigh.

“Dumb move!” shouted Torpedo and whipped around his spear gun and fired just as his flippered feet smacked wetly against the floor of the cockpit. The silver and blue clad Hydrofoil pilot grunted as the thin arrow punched into his chest and jutted angrily out the other side. He dropped to his knees and fell face first, the pistol clattering along the floorboards unfired.

“Blast!” shouted The Eel and was quickly to his feet, his own spear gun clenched tightly in his fist. He let an arrow fly, but Torpedo spun away and it smacked sharply against the metal edge of the hydrofoil and was tossed carelessly into the water. The Eel snarled angrily, and pulled a long, sharp knife from a holster strapped to his well-muscled thigh.

“Looks like we do this the hard way…always liked it up close and personal, anyway!” his brow furrowed into a series of miniature canyons criss-crossing on his forehead. Torpedo could only imagine his teeth bared slightly underneath the mouthpiece. The Joe grinned under his own mouthpiece and kicked off the soaking wet flippers one by one, approaching the Cobra Frogman carefully. His empty spear gun dropped to the floor with a clank as he shuffled closer, keeping his feet in motion, and taking care not to tangle himself up. The Eel charged, shouting, and jabbed the blade in a wild, but skillful arc, barely missing as the Joe S.E.A.L. stepped back and slapped his hand aside. Torpedo responded with a powerful roundhouse kick to the midsection of the Cobra, who grunted and stumbled slightly.

“You’re messin’ with the wrong kanaka boy, snake-face!” Torpedo growled, shifting his stance slightly. The Eel shouted and charged again, the knife making a straight stab towards the Navy man. Torpedo juked and brought his hands together, trapping the Eel’s wrist, and then he turned on his hip and shifted, tossing the Cobra into the air. The Eel hit the ground, rolled, then jumped back to his feet and hurled himself, slamming the Joe headlong in the midsection. The momentum threw them both back into the opposite edge of the canopy, the metal surface digging hard into Torpedo’s spine. He brought up his right knee and pounded it into the kidneys of his foe, who did not relinquish his grip. The gray clad forearm pressed tightly against Torpedo’s throat, and he struggled to draw a breath. Their eyes were mere inches apart and the Eel squinted, boring deep into the S.E.A.L., an angry, defiant glare of triumph, but quickly gave way to strange confusion and uncertainty. The grip loosened, the forearm pulled away, and the Eel stumbled slightly, then slumped to the ground, a red pool swiftly collecting around him. Topside stood behind him in a black wet suit similar to Torpedo’s, his own knife drawn and dark with blood. His latex hood was pulled down and his blonde bearded face showed, smiling with satisfaction.

“I was enjoying the show, Torpedo,” he said, smirking, “but we are on a time table here.” He walked past and sat down at the co-pilot’s control. Torpedo was hunched over and coughing up a storm. He pulled the facemask off and stood slowly, still hacking.

“I…had him…right where…I…\*coff!\*…wanted him.” He stumbled forward and dropped himself into the pilot’s seat.

“Sure you did. Now, shall we get this rolling?”

“Yeah…this crate have a tow cable?”

“Sure does.”

“All right, let’s get those ‘Fish upright, then it’s go time.”

“You’re the boss.”

Torpedo stood and walked to the rear of the boat, Topside close behind.

“Oh, and Topside?” Torpedo asked, halting briefly, but keeping his face forward.

“Yeah?”

“You best forget that you saw an Eel kicking my rear end, got it?”

“Got ya, ‘Pedo,” Topside said, grinning.

“Tele Viper?” Destro asked, strolling back over.

“No change…The Moray had contact, and is now heading back to the island.”

“Radio contact?”

“None so far.”

“Initiate it.”

“Yes, sir.” The Tele Viper flipped a switch to the open channel. “This is home base to Nineteen. Home base to Nineteen, please respond.” He pressed another button for direct feed to his helmet.

“This is Nineteen, Home Base,” the voice said quickly, almost drowning in static. “Go ahead.”

“We’re having trouble reading, Nineteen. What’s your status?” Tele-Viper cast Destro an uncertain look.

Static was all that responded, with almost inaudible snatches of conversation.

“What’s going on?” Destro was visibly irritated and stepped closer to the screen. The Tele-Viper punched a few buttons and frowned.

“Well, there is a storm front moving in, Destro. Sometimes the atmospheric disturbance can disrupt our long-range communications.”

“What about the filtering system I installed?”

“It’s running, sir. I’m not sure what to say.”

“Hmm.” Destro seemed uncertain and stood back up. “I’m not comfortable with this, but we shouldn’t get the men riled up for nothing. Still just the Moray on the screen, right?”

“Yes, sir. But that quadrant is still blacked out.”

“And you’re sure it’s not jammed?”

“If it is, it’s a kind I’ve never seen before. It reads like a technological disturbance. No interference.”

Destro looked at the master radar. “You’re right. It’s just garbled, not completely blacked. See if you can jury rig something from this end, and get those Techno and Cyber-Vipers moving.”

“They’re at the site already, Destro. No problems discovered yet.”

“Very well. Tell those North shore ASP gunners to keep an eye out for anything strange.”

“As you wish.”

Destro crossed his large arms and glared at the computer banks through his steel mask.

The first Flak-Viper nodded and switched over his channel. “ASP Gunner One to remaining gunners Two through Twelve. Respond.” He sat nearly upright in the Assault System Pod, Cobra’s frontal defense against sea faring intruders. It was an amazing little weapon, especially considering it had been invented and produced in 1984 by M.A.R.S. The apparatus sat on a three-pronged base with wheels folded up underneath the moveable one-man pod. The pod itself could be moved 360 degrees around and from sitting fully vertical to lying parallel to the rocky ground it sat on. There were twin cannons, one attached to each side of the pod, which were also moveable from facing flat towards the front, or straight up in the air. All of this combined together to make an extremely potent anti-aircraft or anti ground weapon, fully mobile and fully armed. The three legs could also fold up and have the wheels fold down so the weapon could be transported and even used while mobile. Right now the dozen ASPs were all sitting straight up to allow the gunners full views of the sprawling ocean in front of them. Guns were all directed out at the most main point of invasion, just waiting for targets to approach. Flak-Vipers were the Cobra anti-aircraft specialists and as such were perfectly suited for ASP duty. Each one was clad in gray and green with a rather thick and appropriately named flak jacket on and a green helmet with slick black visors. The visors enabled the troops to have limited night vision as well as mini HUD’s to better track their targets. Flak-Viper One’s chest was empty, since he had not yet fired at any enemy aircraft, but he longed to have yellow planes stitched across it soon, proudly showing how many he had shot down. The canopy was clear so as to avoid reflections of the setting sun, and the air was cool, but his uniform was thick enough to shield him. The eleven other Flak-Vipers quickly responded to the squad leader and informed him that they were all present and had no problems yet.

“I just got the word from the inside. There may have been a possible incident in the gulf at the following coordinates.” He tapped a few keys at the small monitor attached to the inside of the canopy. The ASPs were all linked and the coordinates instantly appeared in everyone’s cockpit. “Gunners Two and Three, you along with me are the front line and in direct path of an invasion. As such, we must be on our toes.”

“Yes, sir,” the reply came from both large men.

Flak-Viper One adjusted the screen in front of him and a small blip suddenly flickered into view. It had just crossed their limited radar horizon and was fully exposed. He hadn’t been prepared for it to happen so soon. The Tele-Viper hadn’t told him exactly how close to shore the incident was. *I’ll have words with Six-Niner when we get inside, that’s for sure!* He thought to himself.

“All right, boys,” he said calmly. “We have contact. Keep your eyes peeled, and if it even smells like U.S. Navy, smoke it!”

The responses were quick and certain. Flak-Viper One smiled. He was almost hoping they were U.S. Military. He practically ached to get those kill marks etched on his tunic. His large hands wrapped slowly around the C-shaped twin controls that maneuvered the ASP in its various directions, his fingers tightening around the triggers.

“C’mon, boys,” he whispered to himself, “Gimme something to shoot at.”

“Land Ho!” Topside shouted from the gun turret, pointing towards the hazy mass of Cobra Island, which loomed on the horizon in front of them.

Torpedo shook his head in response.

“Hey, cut me some slack! I always wanted to say that.” Topside lowered himself down to the cockpit floor. He was once again in his orange life vest and white pants, his white helmet firmly set on his blonde head and plucked his machine gun and rocket launcher from the floor. The launcher was quickly slung over his shoulder and the small rifle was clutched tightly in his right hand.

“Put the stuff in the ‘Fish, Topside. We’ve got to be ready just in time.”

“Understood, Torpedo,” the tough Navy man replied and walked towards the stern of the Moray, perfectly balanced even as the ship bounced roughly over the gulf water. The two Devilfish hummed along the top of the water, dragged by a pair of lines made from steel cable. They were drenched and water sprayed from them, but other than that, they were in fine shape. Torpedo closely monitored the radar screen as the island grew closer and closer and Topside soon joined him after he tossed the weapons in the seats of the orange boats behind them.

“All right, Topside,” Torpedo said sternly. “We’ve gotta make this nice and loud. Our boys are depending on it. We want all eyes on us.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m pretending I have a huge bull’s-eye on my chest.”

“You do.”

“Are you trying to make this easier? Because you’re not.”

The Moray sped up as the land rushed towards them, water spraying up in wide arcs across the bow and over the canopy as the Moray zipped over the surface of the water, bouncing through small waves and blasting ripples into oblivion.

“It’s not supposed to be easy, Topside. That’s why we get the big bucks. Hang on, it’s about to get rough.” Torpedo reached out and flipped a switch, activating the two torpedoes tightly attached to each side of the red, spear-like watercraft.

“Flak-Viper Two to One…come in!” the radio crackled to life inside the cockpit of the first ASP.

“This is One. Go ahead,” the Flak-Viper responded, irritation floating over his stern features.

“We’ve got positive identification. The craft has been cleared as a Moray Hydrofoil.” Numbers Two and Three were on a small part of the north shore that jutted out into the gulf, giving them the first look and the first encounter.

Flak-Viper One cursed under his breath. He had been hoping for something to shoot at. No luck, unfortunately. “Have you made radio contact yet?”

“Negative, sir. They won’t respond. HQ says there may be atmospheric disturbance.”

“All right. Keep trying to get them on the horn. And by all means, keep the guns pointed at them. We still don’t know if they’re friendly.”

“Understo—hold on. Sir?”

“Yeah?” One asked, his spirits lifting slightly. Maybe there was hope for this yet.

“They seem to be towing something. Two small craft. They’re still far out, and I can’t confirm, even with the binoculars.”

“Probably just what was out there. Whatever it was, they found it and are returning it to the island. I don’t see anything unusual with that.”

“Okay. We are still maintaining target lock. The nine ASPs down the north and east coast of the island have also been notified.”

“Good. We are a solid formation, but tightly packed. The defense of the whole island depends on us, Two.”

“Yes, sir. We will make the Commander proud!”

One smiled and reached over to shut down the communications system.

“Flak-Viper One! We have splashes! Repeat, torpedoes have been launched!” Two’s voice was frantic over the radio.

Flak-Viper One’s head drew back visibly. “What? Say again, Two!”

“The Moray has launched torpedoes, sir! On a direct heading for this peninsula.”

“You have firing orders, Two and Three! Subject has initiated hostilities! The north shore is now a free fire zone!” A pair of muffled explosions echoed through the dim, clear air of the shore. It was crisp with the coming storm and the sound carried well. Flak-Viper One found that he was now much less enthusiastic about a coming firefight.

“Fish away!” Torpedo shouted loudly as the underwater missiles plunged into the gulf water with large splashes. They ignited immediately and shot forwards, two slender dark shadows under the blue water, rushing towards the island’s small peninsula, which stuck out in front of the Moray. Topside jumped up, grabbed the red metal beam that straddled the cockpit, the pulled himself up into the turret. He dumped himself into the bucket seat and wrapped his eager hands around the thick handles and triggers.

“No disrespect, sir, but exactly what are torpedoes going to do against land targets?”

“Pure distraction, Topside. Watch and learn,” Torpedo said confidently, picking up even more speed. His index fingers roamed the controls in front of him and easily found long rectangular firing mechanisms. Just ahead, the torpedoes slammed into the rocky beach and detonated loudly, throwing a veritable wall of thick gulf water and explosion of small rocks into the air. The hurling debris completely blocked the ASPs from view and Torpedo guessed was playing havoc with their targeting systems as well. He glanced down at the radar as the Moray approached the land swiftly. He easily picked out the thermal readings behind the wall of water, which was now sprinkling down around the island, showering the ASPs with water and chunks of land. Before their visibility cleared up, Torpedo hauled back on the mechanisms set underneath the chock his hands had been clutched around. The two main cannons on each side of the bow roared with life, huge orange flame bursting from them like a horde of bright insects finally freed from a prison and let loose into the air. Smoke followed the yellow/orange flash as the large shells whipped through the air, trails of gray following close behind. The first shell plowed into ASP number two blasting it apart into countless blue shards of shrapnel. The gunner was completely obliterated under the punishing blast, and the shrapnel shower tore through the ASP just next to it, shredding the gunner of that one, who sat unprotected underneath a glassless canopy. The second shell exploded just in front of ASP number three, sending a wide geyser of rocks and soil into the air, and clumsily flipped the gun-pod over onto its left side. The land was now rushing ever closer, and some water and dirt was actually sprinkling down on the two Joes as Torpedo jerked the controls to the port side, his muscular arms straining under the struggle. The hydrofoil lurched left, actually scraping the peninsula and sending dirt and rocks flying over the slowly burning hulks of ASP, which lay in rubble on the shore. Another wall of water was thrown from the boat’s wake and doused some of the flames, before running over the rocky shore and joining its family back in the gulf.

“Ready with that turret, Topside?” Torpedo asked, nailing the throttle down as far as it would go.

“Affirmative!” Topside shouted, flexing his fingers on the triggers. The wind slammed through his flesh and hair, and his stomach lurched as the Moray accelerated all the way. He could already see three more ASPs on the shoreline as they approached, now parallel to the edge of the island. Loud, solid gun blasts echoed through the air as columns of gulf erupted into the air behind them. Small clouds of smoke whisped from the barrels of the gun-pods that sat before them.

“First volley missed!” Torpedo shouted triumphantly. “We should be inside their range before they can correct trajectory!”

“I’m ready!” The ASPs were now close and Topside could see the gunners inside quite clearly. We didn’t want to see them too clearly, especially with what he was about to do. As they drew close to the first one, Topside yanked back on the triggers, the twin cannons leaping to life, struggling to break free from the very mounts that held them in place. The guns made a vicious *CHAKK CHAKK CHAKK* noise as they lunged around in Topside’s tight grasp. Shell casings flung clumsily through the sea air and splashed into the surrounding water amidst small puffs of gun smoke. Topside walked the orange tracers into the canopy of the first ASP, ripping through metal, flak jacket and flesh equally. The second ASP quickly came parallel and the Flak-Viper struggled to get out of the canopy as the tracers ripped it apart as well. This time, a stray round must have hit something important as the gun-pod exploded loudly, splitting apart and crumbling to the ground even as blue shards erupted into the air. The third ASP’s canopy was thrown open, and a Flak-Viper kneeled inside, his large rifle clutched firmly in his hands in a final act of defiance. He blasted off two shots, which punched into the metal beam over the cockpit, and actually tore through it pretty nicely. Topside’s eyes grew wide. *That’s some hand cannon!* He thought as he adjusted aim for the smaller target. *Makes this at least a little more justified.* The gun exploded in another barrage under his clammy hands, the barrels changing slowly into red cylinders, overheating with the constant flow of large bore hot lead. The Flak-Viper was thrown into a clumsy backwards somersault and hit the rocky terrain roughly, face first. Topside spun around quickly in the turret and riddled the vacant ASP with gunfire, leaving it a peppered, smoking ruin. He swiftly swiveled the turret back around to front and glared at the island alongside of them. It dipped in slightly, and then jutted out again. There were three ASPs on the inlet, swiveling around to face the threat, and three more ASPs on the peninsula ahead, also adjusting aim.

“This is gonna be close!” shouted Torpedo as his hand reached over to another switch, his eyes narrowing in focus on the radar screen. The second group of three ASPs was locked in the crosshairs, their thermal readings throbbing slowly. The Joe S.E.A.L. quickly threw the switch and a door rose quickly from the bow of the ship, revealing a rack of four missiles underneath. With a continuation of the motion, Torpedo slapped down four switches just above the first one and the slender, yellow tubes roared from the rack with a blast of orange and red flame and four plumes of smoke, following the deadly weapons into the air. Not waiting to confirm the hit, Torpedo once again sent the Moray into a tight turn to port, just before crossing in front of the inlet, into the ASPs line of fire. Water sprayed from underneath as the boat cut a trench in the gulf and hurtled back out to sea. Topside swung the turret around and roared off sporadic gunfire towards the inlet, smiling slightly as he saw the four rockets strike the peninsula where they had been aimed. The three ASPs disappeared underneath the cloud of thick gray smoke and thunderous explosion of yellow. Blue shrapnel arced high into the air and showered into the water, leaving an indiscriminate pile of smoldering blue rubble where the gun-pods once stood.

“Nice shot, ‘Pedo!” he shouted just as plumes of water were thrown into the air around them. The echoes of ASP fire coasted over the land as more large fountains erupted in their vicinity.

“Don’t congratulate me until the mission’s done, Topside! Three ASPs don’t mean squat if there’s still some left to kill our boys before they hit land.” The Moray dodged and weaved frantically as more ASP gunfire showered down around them. The columns of water soon were exploding just behind them as the Moray circled back around.

“I think we’re just out of range. Get in the ‘Fish, Topside. I’ve got to wedge something into the throttle.”

“How many did we nail?”

Torpedo did quick calculations in his head as he searched the cockpit. “Eight total. Four left.”

“There were only three on that inlet, right?” Topside asked. Torpedo lifted his head.

“Yeah.” his face became concerned.

“We missed one. Tell you what, I’ll hit the inlet if you want to go searching.”

Torpedo found a large wrench and finagled with it until it was wedged into the throttle and the Moray was hurtling back towards the island. Explosions rocked the gulf near them again. The ASPs were having difficulty getting a lock on the fast moving watercraft.

“No time to form another plan, Topside. Let’s do it! Just be careful.”

“Always.” Topside said and threw himself onto one of the Devilfish, hitting the metal bow roughly, but remaining on his feet. Torpedo was much more graceful, and landed in a crouch, clutching for life on the grates over the engine on the bow of the small, orange boat. The two craft bounced over the rough water, made only worse by the falling shells. Topside rolled onto his back, holding tight, and with a swift kick, knocked the large metal hook free that was securely attached to the grate. He barely remained on the Devilfish as it dipped deeply forward, shocked by the halted momentum. Torpedo repeated the motion, and then they quickly slid into the seats and gunned forward, trying to catch up to the Moray, which was drawing nearer to the inlet in front of them. The Joe S.E.A.L. made a quick hand signal to Topside, who responded with a nod and continued forward as his partner veered sharply off to the starboard, spraying water as he adjusted his trajectory.

“Flak-Viper One to Two or Three! Respond!” the large squad leader shouted frantically into his communicator, which was clutched tightly in one hand. “Four? Six? Anyone?” he asked again. No one answered. The raging gun battle could be heard in the distance, but it was impossible to tell who was winning. It could be that his fellow Flak-Vipers simply couldn’t hear him over the gunfire. He went back to the radar screen and quickly saw that two smaller blips had pulled away from the Moray, one changing course and heading towards him. Had the others noticed this? He wasn’t sure, but he was taking no chances. He wrapped his hand around the lever and grimaced.

“Come and get me, Americans!”

“What?” Destro shouted, more loudly than he had meant to.

“A gunfight, sir. That’s what it appears to be.” The Tele-Viper cleared his throat nervously. Cobra Commander had been known to execute the bringer of bad news, but he was pretty sure Destro was more clear headed. Pretty sure, but not positive.

“Bring the HISS tanks forward to the north shore! Have a squad of Eels ready and tell the Cobra Air Force to stand by!” As you command, sir. What about the southwest—“

“Unimportant! The threat is in the north. Reroute them, Tele-Viper!”

“As you command, Destro.”

Destro stood back again, his face enraged under the mask. Enraged, but curious. He could think of no one brave or stupid enough to plan this kind of stunt. Well, almost no one. His face changed slightly as an uncertain revelation blew threw his mind like a cool breeze of clarity.

The Moray hurtled forward, carving through the water, heading straight for the inlet and the three ASPs.

“Gunner Nine to Gunner Seven, create a crossfire. The hydrofoil is not changing course, we should be able to catch it.”

“Confirmed, Nine. Proceed.”

The two ASPs swiveled quickly, their barrels pointing at a slightly inward angle, aiming slightly out to sea. The Moray plunged forward and they opened fire, all six barrels pounding into the red Cobra watercraft. A raging explosion tore through the area of gulf spraying blue/green water, gray hull and red shrapnel in all directions. A small tower of flame shot into the air, and quickly ignited the oil floating on the water, leaving a thin veil of fire whipping in the cool, breezy air.

“Yeah!” shouted number Nine. “Target eliminated!”

“Get One on the horn. Let him—“ Number Eight stopped in mid sentence as an orange streak burst through the flame in front of him. The Devilfish struck a chunk of hull and launched into the air, ribbons of orange and yellow dragged behind it as it leapt through the fire, almost ten feet above the water. Topside was half standing in the cockpit, his hand wrapped securely around the controls, his eyes two narrow slits under the white helmet. In his free hand, a portable rocket launcher was gripped, held firm over his left shoulder, a small yellow knob sticking out the front of it. The missile blasted from the launcher with a belch of smoke and tail of solid orange flame. Just as the Devilfish slammed to the surface of the water, sending Topside jerking wildly, the missile struck the middle ASP and blew it into nothingness, leaving the three legs and a jagged shard on top of it, concealed by smoke and fire. Topside dropped the rocket launcher into the cockpit next to him, grabbed the wheel with both hands and turned harshly, bringing the Devilfish into a tight left turn just before it hit land. It spun into a fishtail, then the engines gunned back to life and it lurched out of the inlet, back towards open sea. Topside swerved skillfully around the wall of flame and disappeared behind it, leaving the ASP pilots wondering. He pulled a one eighty after roaring past the fire and hurtled forward again, trying to stick close to the right edge of the firewall, which had quickly died down to a small strip of flickering flames, behind which Topside was quickly becoming visible. ASP Number Nine roared off a pair of shots, which exploded just behind the Devilfish as it weaved gracefully through the water. Topside primed the launcher, then quickly let all four of his small gray missiles fly, not wanting to chance a miss. The tiny cylinders blasted from their individual racks, and jets quickly roared to life, throwing the small missiles forward like deadly, explosive darts. The Devilfish swerved quickly to starboard as the missiles peppered the ninth ASP and reduced it to smoldering junk, throwing shrapnel and blue chunks in all directions. Topside glared into the eyes of the Flak-Viper manning the last remaining ASP on the inlet. He quickly approached the land, and could almost make out the man as he stared at him. Topside was too close for the ASP to fire on, yet the soldier remained in his seat, almost daring the Joe to fire on him. The Navy man didn’t hesitate and opened up with the bow mounted twin cannons. More shell casings flew into the air as orange sparks vomited noisily from the barrels of the 20mm cannons. The canopy was riddled with the barrage of gunfire and the Flak-Viper jerked spasmodically inside, unprotected by the metal frame surrounding him. Topside grimaced, happy that his part of the mission was complete, but not altogether comfortable with gunning down a man trapped in a metal tub, useless at such close range. He spun around the Devilfish quickly and headed back out to sea, skittering by the flames still flickering on the oil slicked water. Flak-Viper Seven pulled his eyes open by sheer willpower, his blood soaked chest heaving rapidly. Out in the gulf, Topside swerved slightly, coming back around to finish off the ASP, unaware. He approached, gaining speed and quite suddenly, the ASP opened fire. Topside’s eyes grew wide as the shell drilled into the front of the approaching boat, and ripped it to metal shreds, forcing the bow into the water. The Devilfish halted too suddenly and spun forward, throwing Topside like a rag doll from the cockpit and into the murky water. With a crash the orange boat flipped over into the oil slick, broke apart and burst into flame, the explosion rocking the small inlet, although Flak-Viper Seven could no longer hear it.

It did not take Torpedo long to find the remaining ASP on the far west side of the north shore, but he was surprised that he was not fired upon and once he drew closer, he could clearly see that the cockpit was empty. He coasted the Devilfish into shore, and vaulted swiftly out, into a small crouch, his silenced MP5 out and at the ready. He reached into a pouch on the chest of his special wet suit, right next to a small red grenade that hung there as well. The shaped charge came out smoothly and he placed it in the cockpit, aimed to take out the control panels surrounding it. Just as he finished and began to stand, the roaring gunshot forced him to the ground. The large bore slug ripped through the metal frame cockpit like a hot knife through butter as Torpedo spun around on his rear end, raising his machine gun. The Flak-Viper emerged from tall grass just ahead, an extremely large rifle cradled in equally large arms. The weapon was almost as long as the soldier was tall, and had a large round barrel just above a large, very sharp looking bayonet.

“Man, would I love to see what this thing can do to the human body,” Flak-Viper hissed, bringing the rifle up. “But I’m sure I’d get more brownie points by bringing in a prisoner. Someone to be interrogated, you know?”

“Might as well shoot me, snake. All the words you’ll get out of my mouth is kiss my—“

“That’s enough!” Flak-Viper One screamed, pointing the gun. Torpedo smiled, already convinced that this little battle was his. This boy was unstable. Easy pickings.

“What do you need that gun for, anyway? You’re a big boy,” Torpedo said, standing. His MP5 remained on the ground. “Almost as big as me,” he said tapping himself on the chest.

“I’m bigger than you,” Flak-Viper snarled.

“Come on over, and let’s see,” Torpedo said. Flak-Viper was about five feet away, gun aimed and at the ready.

“What, do you think I’m stupid?” he asked, lowering the weapon and gesturing to himself. Torpedo moved quickly, but not in the direction Flak-Viper anticipated. He rolled back over the nose of the ASP and landed in a crouch behind it, lowering his head as the rifle boomed loudly, tearing through the metal pod as if it was tissue paper. Torpedo rolled to his left, plucked the grenade from his chest and tossed as another shot rang out. The grenade exploded loudly off to Flak-Viper’s left and he laughed.

“Not even close!” Flak-Viper shouted triumphantly. Torpedo leapt to his feet and ran like mad, trying to angle himself to be covered by the ASP. Flak-Viper charged forward, growling. The Joe S.E.A.L. threw himself in a wild dive, and hit the shallow water, sliding quickly underneath. He zipped through the water as gunfire roared over his head, and brought himself up into the seat of the Devilfish, keeping his head low. A bullet hummed just over him, but he found the gun controls and opened up on the beach, pounding the rocky shore with deadly lead. The Flak-Viper frowned and ran towards the ASP.

“Two can play at that game!” he shouted and threw himself into the cockpit. “My guns are bigger than yours!”

Torpedo grimaced out, realizing that his guns only pointed straight forward. Flak-Viper sat back and grabbed the levers, then halted.

“What the—“ he asked craning his neck back to see what was in his seat. The shaped charge went off with a muffled boom, Torpedo lowering his head to avoid sight of the carnage. When he did look up, he noticed with satisfaction that the gun-pod was torn to shreds and burning. He gunned the engine and spun the ‘Fish around, heading back out to the gulf to give Topside some backup. The shooting had stopped, and he had hoped it was good news, although there had been no sign of his partner yet.

Within minutes, the S.E.A.L. was approaching the inlet and the roaring, oil fueled fire made him nervous immediately. He saw floating gray and red shards of metal, some of them suspended in the thick dark pool of oil, and little isolated fingers of flame covered most of the area. Then he saw the Devilfish. It was in pieces and on fire, mingled in with the Moray chunks and looked completely torn apart. He lowered his head, noticing at the same time, that all ASPs had been neutralized. The wreck of the Devilfish was very severe, though, and very, very final.

“Good work, Topside,” he said quietly and saluted the orange and gray wreck.

“’Pedo?” a hoarse voice called from the S.E.A.L.s right. He spun quickly. Topside lay in the shallow water at the shore; his bearded head lifted slightly, his whole body covered with seawater, seaweed and minor burns. Torpedo brought the ‘Fish around and coasted into the inlet where Topside lay, looking worse for wear. He extended his hand.

“Thought we lost you,” he said with little emotion.

“Nah. I’m harder to kill than that,” he said, his voice sounding rough.

“You all right?” Torpedo asked.

“Lost my dang helmet,” he said angrily, rubbing his head through his soaked blonde hair. A nasty gash ran down the length of his arm, matched by a smaller one on his forehead. Each one was bleeding freely, but not seriously. “Other than that, I’m good.”

Torpedo couldn’t help but break his serious demeanor and smirk a little. “Well, climb on, tough guy,” he said dragging his partner onto the Devilfish. “We did it. It’s all up to the big boys now,” he said, gazing off into the horizon. The orange and pink sun was sinking below the horizon almost like the Gulf of Mexico was swallowing it. Above it, dark clouds were collecting together and joining into a chunky, bulbous mass.

The storm was coming, in more ways than one.

# CHAPTER FIVE

**Calm Before the Storm**

The sun was a strange pinkish blob in the orange sky and slowly drifted downwards, casting its pink haze over the rippling gulf water. Cool air roared through Stalker like one of his grandmother’s hugs; a little fierce, but soothing and comforting. His mind automatically went back almost thirty years, as it always did when he was in this position, heading towards battle. Southeast Asia, where he had become a man. He’d spent many a pink sunset hanging out of a speeding helicopter, only back then it was a Huey, not a Tomahawk as it was now. The throbbing of the helicopter blades was a familiar sound, one he had lived with for a solid portion of his life. Like a soft lullaby, calming him before the chaos began. Him and Snakes…Tommy, Dickie, Ramon. Wade Collins. It was a bad time, but Stalker would not have traded it for the world. Nothing makes friends tighter than impending death. Death, which had now claimed half of the old squad. Dickie and Ramon in the rice patties, and Tommy just half a decade ago. He couldn’t help but feel his brown eyes begin to mist over, and the familiar song floated into his head as if an inspiration. It was a song many sang back in ‘Nam. A popular song at the time, and one he and the squad often crooned on the way to the bush. It helped calm the nerves much like the light tune of the helicopter blades. Everyone in the squad had sung along, except for Snake Eyes. Even before the accident, he hadn’t been much of a talker. Always staring at his sister’s picture, clutching it tight, as if holding on to it would protect him from the atrocities all around. And it had, until that fateful day. Stalker’s first experience with ninja skill and mystery, seeing Tommy zipping through the tall grass, actually swerving around tracer fire and deftly avoiding bullets as if they were pesky house flies. Stalker could barely believe it even as he saw it, but luckily the Huey pilots held it together enough to lay down cover fire and not fly away as Stalker had ordered. He had never forgiven himself for that order. If they had listened, he and Wade would be the only ones left. A life without Snake Eyes, his best friend, his soul brother, was one that Stalker did not want to contemplate. But Tommy and Snakes made it back to the Huey, Snake Eyes’ wounds giving him his ticket back home, which is where the chaos would *really* begin. The Army Ranger looked down at himself sitting in a gunner’s seat behind a mounted M60 Heavy Machine Gun. He was in the transport hold of the GI Joe Tomahawk, his clammy hands holding on to the weapon like a baby clutches his beloved blanket. He wore his green and brown tiger stripe fatigues, going with them instead of his black BDUs and knit cap. The green cammies and beret just fit him better. They felt like home, and if Snake Eyes couldn’t be here, well he had to do something to remind him of the old days. His nerves jumped slightly as the darkening sky whipped by outside the large, double bladed helicopter. It flew close down to the water, skimming the wave tops, trying to stay indistinct. They had flown up from the south, hoping to hit the southwestern shore, which, if everything was going to plan, should be blocked out from radar. A leather strap was over his shoulder, a silenced M-16 with starlight scope hanging loosely from it. He had two leather straps going down his chest, a knife attached to one, and a pair of grenades on the other. A Colt bolt action .45 was secured in a holster on his thigh and yet another knife was on his boot. He was “strappin’” as his brother’s friends from Detroit used to say. Some friends they were…his brother went out with them one night, and ended up in the morgue. Stalker cursed himself out silently. His mind was straying way too far into negativity, and he had to calm his nerves somehow. Quite suddenly, he thought of the perfect way, as Cobra Island still loomed quite in the distance, a great expanse of empty water out before it. He began to sing.

“There must be some kind of way out of here

said the joker to the thief.

There’s too much confusion

I can’t get no relief

Businessman, they drink my wine

Plow men dig my Earth

None will level on the line

Nobody of it is worth,”

The singing out loud was like a warm, calming breeze washing over him, his mind once again drifting back to Vietnam. A dangerous land of gunfire, mines and grenades, but a place where lifelong friendships were made, even with those destined to die at such a young age. He smiled softly, when the voices broke out behind him.

“No reason to get excited

the thief he kindly spoke

There are many here among us

Who feel that life is but a joke

But you and I we’ve been through that

And this is not our fate

So let us not talk falsely now

The hour’s getting late.”

Stalker turned and saw Duke, Recondo and Beachhead singing along, faces solemn, but happy. Stalker smiled broadly, realizing that the song was universal among vets. No matter what squad or what capacity, it was a familiar, soothing lullaby. Stalker joined in and the four of them recited the final verse.

“All along the watchtower

princes kept the view

While all the women came and went

Bare-foot servants too..But

Outside in the cold distance

A wild cat did growl

Two riders were approachin’

And the wind began to howl!”

Ripcord cast a confused look towards Muskrat, who then glanced at Falcon. The lieutenant smiled, enjoying the sound of the tune, which was being carried surprisingly well with low, gruff voices. The young men shrugged their shoulders.

“It’s a vet thing,” Falcon said, smirking. “Might as well let them get it out of their system now. Who knows what creatures in those woods would think it was a mating call or something!” the three younger men shared a laugh as the four veterans finished the song.

“*All along the w—“* A dull thudding broke up the verse, exploding from out of nowhere, orange tracers lighting up the graying sky. Hunks of tan camouflage Tomahawk hide blasted from the side of the helicopter in bright yellow flashes and little sprays of smoke. The ‘copter dipped and lunged to one side, all men in the hold clutching onto to anything nailed down for dear life.

“Lift-Ticket!” Duke screamed into the cockpit. “Sitrep *NOW*!”

“I am trying to avoid certain death by tracer fire, sir!” the Tomahawk pilot replied sarcastically as the Tomahawk swiftly lunged the other way.

“Where’s it coming from?” Duke asked, standing uncertainly as the Tomahawk lurched to the other side. He slammed both hands into the walls to steady himself. Three streaks of red tracer fire roared just by on the other edge of the personnel carrier.

“A Moray hydrofoil…I couldn’t see it coming! Radar had to be shut off to keep *us* hidden.”

“How did they know we were here?” Falcon asked Duke, standing as well. Wind whipped through the cargo hold of the Tomahawk, it being empty on both sides. There was an M60 on each side with gunner’s seats, although all of the gunners were now standing, deeper inside, to avoid getting tossed out into the surf.

“Don’t know, Lieutenant. This section of island has been notoriously tough to defend! Me and the General thought this would be the perfect insert location.” The helicopter jerked as another round pounded into its thick hull. Lift Ticket quickly corrected and got it straight again, the copter now rising high into the air. Recondo peered out of the cargo hold and got a clear view of the red ship firing on them. A lone Eel sat in the turret on top of the red beam that went over the driver’s seat. The turret was swiveling wildly, the Eel desperately trying to get them back in his sights.

“We gotta wax this sorry case before he blows this insert!” Duke shouted to the pilot.

“Affirmative, Top! I’m jamming on all freaks, and hoping that I’m not broadcasting our location to the entire island!”

“Blackout should have that covered.” Duke dropped himself into the co-pilot’s seat next to Lift Ticket, nervous sweat rippling down his prominent cheekbones.

“I’m taking her in,” Lift Ticket said with determination.

Duke nodded and turned his head back. “Everyone hold tight back there! Anyone who loses their lunch has latrine duty when we get back to base!”

The Tomahawk plunged suddenly downward as the Eel shifted his aim. It hurtled towards the sea and Duke’s eyes grew wide.

“Lift Ticket, that water snake’s got us right in his crosshairs!”

“Hold on!” Lift Ticket shouted just as the Eel opened fire. The large transport ‘copter banked right viciously, turning almost sideways in the air.

“Crud!” shouted Beachhead as he was thrown across the hold, towards the precipice. Stalker threw himself forward and hit his fellow Ranger bluntly, sending them both skidding into the rear of the hold. Just as they cleared a barrage of tracers ripped through the open space of the hold, tearing apart the gunner’s chairs and M60’s and riddling the small area with deadly lead.

“Hit the floor!” Ripcord shouted, hugging the ground, his fingertips dug tightly into one of the seats that sat against the wall near to the cockpit. Recondo threw himself backwards, stumbling into the small hallway that led to the cockpit, orange blasts of light whizzing close by his face. Muskrat stumbled back as well; farther than he had anticipated and toppled out of the hold, the side that was facing up into the air. He spun awkwardly in midair, his stomach heaving with the sudden and unexpected change in gravity. Hovering there for a moment Muskrat’s eyes grew wide, the choppy ocean beckoning him with thousands of crashing waves. He dropped quickly, but thought fast and wrapped his arms around the base of the M60, holding tightly to avoid the uncomfortable impact with the ocean below. Falcon remained in his seat, right next to where Ripcord lay, but was far enough back so that the deadly tracer fire did not strike him. The large helicopter veered off, corrected its axis and plunged again, swerving underneath another volley of large bore turret fire. Muskrat whipped around, his bare arms still clutching to the gun post, his face twisted in a look of determination. The wind from the propellers beat down upon the GI Joe swamp fighter, his dirty blonde hair whipping in the wind. Falcon leapt from his seat and slid across the smooth, now level surface of the hold, sliding swiftly over to the Joe in dark green pants and a sleeveless green shirt, then extended his hand. Muskrat wrapped his hand around the Lieutenant’s and Falcon quickly dragged him in, just as another rapid succession of tracer rounds tore through the air where he was hanging.

“We’re not done yet!” Lift Ticket’s voice boomed from the cockpit as the Tomahawk veered down and to the left. The large vehicle circled around in the dim air, just zipping out of the path of the bullets pounding from the twin barrels of the turret, which was already glowing white hot under the strain. The Eel’s arms throbbed with the repeated pressure of the gun’s recoil, but he still fired, desperately trying to lead the tracers into the approaching helicopter.

“Have you radioed HQ?” he asked the Lamprey pilot, shouting over the deafening reports of the automatic weapon. His voice trembled almost comically as his whole body shook while the twin barrels spewed forth deadly lead.

“Comm’s down! I think the storm front is scrambling it!”

“Blast!” the Eel shouted, swiveling quickly and roaring off another volley. The large transport ‘copter changed directions quite suddenly and banked slightly, then plunged yet again.

“Who is this crazy pilot?” he asked to no one in particular. The helicopter seemed to be swerving just for the sake of swerving, but the Eel suddenly realized what the ‘crazy pilot’ was doing.

“Lamprey! To port! To port! He’s going to use his chin t—“

Lift Ticket grinned almost maniacally inside the cockpit as the Tomahawk hurtled downwards and he unleashed the powerful automatic machine gun mounted on a swivel turret just under the cockpit. The Eel had been expecting him to head for the hills, but instead he turned and returned fire, peppering the Moray with chin turret gunfire. With the skill only decades of flying could provide, Lift Ticket lifted the helicopter slowly, walking the path of bullets through the hydrofoil’s engine, then tore the turret and canopy to shreds, sending red shards spinning in all directions, chase by orange and yellow sparks of metal on metal. The Eel was completely annihilated by the gunfire, but the Lamprey lunged to his left, just avoiding the spray of lead. The Tomahawk whizzed by and the Lamprey lifted his fist, but suddenly glanced in the cargo hold and saw a camouflaged trooper with a beret behind the handle of an M60, which had been forcibly removed from its mount. He dove for cover, but too late as the ’60 erupted and the large caliber ammunition took him down where he stood.

“That was cold, Falcon!” Muskrat shouted, standing behind the Lieutenant.

“It’s him or us…he tells his pals what he saw and this op is blown. I think my actions were more than justified!”

“Chill, LT,” Muskrat snickered, patting the lieutenant on the back. “Just busting your chops.”

“Lift Ticket? Duke?” Falcon asked, turning towards the cockpit.

“What is it, troop?” Duke asked, emerging as Falcon approached. The ride was considerably smoother now, although the shredded cargo hold gave away the fact that all was not normal.

“The night vision gear is in the drink,” he said matter-of-factly. Change of plans?” Falcon asked, concern on his face.

“Negative, Lieutenant,” Duke said gruffly. He glanced at his watch and grimaced. “We now have fifteen until our rendezvous.” He dropped his arm and made a quick mental count of his men. When he verified that everyone was present and unpunctured, he turned his head to the cockpit. “Lift Ticket, double time! We’re behind schedule!” The Tomahawk punched forward, sending the men in back lurching slightly, but they all maintained their footing.

“OK, Joes!” Duke shouted, quite suddenly even more determined than before. “This mission is still green lit, understand me?”

“*Yes sir, Top Sergeant*!” the voices barked simultaneously.

“We will reach the drop zone in five. Let’s lock and load, gentlemen, times a wasting!”

“*Yo Joe!*” The men shouted and scattered to retrieve the gear that had been strewn throughout the cabin. The Tomahawk had raised its altitude and hummed over the green treetops that saturated the southeastern coast. A clearing came into view, just on the edge of the water, and the cargo door swung open, revealing the seven men, standing proud, the air whipped about by the helicopter blades throwing their hair around, and ripping at their cloth uniforms. Mission Leader Duke stood, his short blonde hair unmoved. He wore a tan shirt and his green khaki pants, a pistol secured to one leg. He sneered at the tall grass below as it flattened out in little circles under the punishing winds of the Tomahawk’s propellers. A submachine gun was strapped over his left shoulder, and he grimaced, and then jumped to the grass below. Ripcord was next, dressed as usual in full camouflage, trimmed dark for deep forest combat. He wore a black helmet that covered his bright red hair over his rounded face. He held a larger machine gun in his hands, the magazine and barrel almost a full foot longer than the sergeants. With a low grunt, he dropped next, revealing Recondo just behind him. The Joe jungle trooper was clad in his typical tan shirt and camouflage pants. A pistol was holstered to his chest, and he frowned just underneath his thick brown moustache. The wind roared through his boonie cap, which was tied up on one hand, and he held it down firmly. A shotgun was cradled in the crook of his arm, attached to a strap the held his backpack securely to him. He jumped and Beachhead walked to the opening. The Tomahawk shook as Lift Ticket tried to hold it as steady as possible, but Beachhead skillfully held his balance. He wore his green knit ski mask and shirt, covered by a black flak jacket with ammo clips jammed into the chest pouches. His legs were clad in dark brown and green camouflage, which blended in perfectly as he hit the tall grass and rolled, keeping low. His machine gun bounced against his back as he landed, but the leather strap held it fast. Muskrat jumped next, pulling out his boonie cap from a pouch in his pants and pulling it taught over his dirty blonde hair. Falcon hit ground next and dashed to the treeline where the others were already setting up perimeter watch. The night was settling onto the island and light was quickly fading, which only served to help the men. Stalker was the last to leap, landing gracefully, his M-16 held tight. Just as he left the hold, Duke shone a penlight twice into the cockpit of the transport helicopter and Lift Ticket brought the tan aircraft up and away. Within minutes it had vanished from sight and soon later could no longer be heard either. Stalker shifted his aim as he approached the trees, scanning the area carefully to make sure they were not being followed or pursued. He hit the trees silently and rejoined the other six men. Duke signaled for them to come in close.

“From here on,” he whispered, “silent signals. We’re meeting our tour guide in seven, one klick due east. He’s been keeping tabs for a while, but if we’re late, he skips town. Understood?”

The men all nodded, strange looks on their faces. They looked at each other as they continued through the bush, all faces asking the same question. Tour guide? Beachhead lit out first, Recondo on his heels. Muskrat, Falcon and Duke followed, with Stalker and Ripcord pulling up the rear. They moved like silent wraiths through the jungle; noiseless and motionless, almost like energy rippling through the branches with no corporeal form. The night had now fully settled and darkness shrouded them like a mother’s loving arms.

“Tele-Viper? Any more word?” Destro asked, visibly annoyed.

“Still no word from the ASP squad, sir. I do not have a good feeling. We have dispatched a group of HISS tanks and the Eels have set up an ambush on the eastern shore. We are prepared.”

“Has Cobra Commander been informed?”

“No, sir.” The Tele-Viper turned slightly, but thought better of it and spun back forward. Destro became pensive for a moment.

“We have no choice, Tele-Viper. I’ll inform the Commander, put the base on full alert. Pull troops from all positions to set up a front line between the eastern shore and the citadel. Understood?”

“Yes, Destro. What about the southwest? Still no radar coverage.”

“Wait for a short time, then scramble a mixed team to the woods, just to be safe. First priority is a frontal assault.”

“Yes, sir.”

Destro turned and scowled at the command center before him. Snakebite was milling around on the other side of the large round room. Cobra Commander was in his quarters and the others were all returning from the rally. He sighed as the numerous lights on the walls and ceilings flickered, and then changed from white light to a clear, disturbing red hue. Loudspeakers exploded to life informing the population of impending danger and ordering everyone to report to their squad leaders. The time had come, Destro was sure. Of another thing he was sure; the time had come far too soon. He spun on his heels and stormed off towards the officer’s quarters, his red cape fluttering along the smooth floor behind him. Cobra Commander came roaring from the hallway, his two Immortals barely on his heels.

“Destro! What is the meaning of this?” he screamed, his hood wrinkled and swaying. Destro approached his leader and placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Come, Commander,” he said, motioning to the meeting room. “Let’s not get everyone in an uproar, shall we?” It was too late for that, though. Red light still saturated the command center and all surrounding areas. Vipers of all sorts, colors, and types dashed in all directions, many heading for the motor pool, some running to the armory and still others heading far below the island, rushing towards the hidden watercraft stowed inside. Sirens wailed their piercing mating call, beckoning all into action.

Destro and the Commander each sat at one of the chairs, as the door slid shut and the Sieges remained outside.

“Destro! This is intolerable!” Cobra Commander shouted, standing back up.

“Please compose yourself!” Destro replied.

“I am among the last to know of an attack on my own island, and you tell me to compose myself? How dare you!”

“I admit I was wrong, Commander. I thought it was an isolated problem. Evidently it is not. I apologize. Steps are being taken to assure that if it is an attack, they will not make it past the three mile limit.” Destro’s voice was stern, yet calming. A deep baritone boom, a light Scottish twinge floating in his speech as it always did when he was enraged.

 Cobra Commander sat back down. “Close…so close,” he muttered, already sounding defeated. “We projected thirty-six hours for a coordinated attack! How could the United States government move so quickly?”

“They got lucky, Commander, that is all. Remember, we have the upper hand here. Against HISS tanks, Stingers, Rattlers and Morays, conventional U.S. armament is less than nothing.”

“But we have shipped most of our weapons to the Amazo—“

“No matter, Commander! If we didn’t see this attack coming, it has to be small in scale. As soon as they hit land, they will be vaporized. Have some faith in your troops, Commander. Have some faith in me.”

Cobra Commander seemed to stiffen immediately, as if realization was sinking in. “Yes…of course. We have the upper hand. We can still win the day!” He stood proudly, his hood shaking with his laughter. “YES! We will hold our ground! Annihilate the counter attack, then launch our own. We were going to wait for the perfect time, Destro. That time is now!” his eyes were glazed over with wild, ambitious fury. He placed his opened palm against the thick oak table. “Just as we are smashing this pitiful counter attack on the island, America itself will *burn*! The combination of these two events will launch us into position…to clutch the United States in our fist…” he lifted his arm, and clenched the blue gloved hand into a tight fist. “…and *crush them*!” he screamed the last words, slamming his fist onto the oak table with shocking force. Destro himself took an uneasy step back. Cobra Commander drew his head up and around, cocking it strangely to the left. “This is a blessing in disguise, noble Destro. Our rule begins today.” He finished the sentence with calm certainty and left the room, the automatic door hissing shut behind him, leaving Destro alone with his thoughts. Behind the thick beryllium mask, a cocky smile formed.

“Welcome back, Cobra Commander.” He turned and followed his august leader out into the fray.

The thick curtain of night had been drawn closed over the wide window of the sky. The whole world was now bathed in a certain inky blackness, mushy gray clouds blocking out any trace of the moon or stars. A deep rumbling shook the heavens and an abrupt flash roared through the clouds, illuminating the churning sea for a brief second. Had any Cobra troopers been staring out in the sea at that split second, they would have seen a large pointed watercraft slicing cleanly through the slamming surf and rising waves. A sharp, frigid breeze was tearing through the night, whipping up water and slapping it down against the metal hull of the Landing Craft Tank with violent authority. There was no rain falling yet, but it would…and soon. A lone figure stood perched at the bow of the ship, his knees buckled slightly, and his back hunched. He lowered the night vision goggles from his eyes, letting them adjust to the dim light of early nighttime. They were well-trained eyes and soon after they were exposed, the shore of the island began to blur into vague recognition. The man was dressed for a night operation, wearing a dark brown flack vest with an ammo belt running form shoulder to hip. The jacket underneath was a deep, dark gray, which matched the thick, wrinkled pants he wore as well. A matching gray helmet was pulled tightly over his red/brown hair, with small patches of darker gray camouflage spattered about it. Clutched tightly in his fists was an obscenely large assault rifle, a large round barrel at the end and a jagged, sharp bayonet jutting out just below. A leather strap dangled from it and brushed against the soldier’s tensed muscles of his large legs. His heart pounded a steady, determined rhythm, as it always did just before battle. This man was the point man. First man to hit the beach, enter the jungle or burst through a door. He was Spearhead, and that was his job. He often wondered why he was chosen for this unenviable duty, but before self-pity moved too far, he told himself that he actually enjoyed it. There was nothing like the thrill of battle, bullets whizzing by your head as you were the first man to hit enemy territory, clearing a path for the men to follow. His job was vital to the team, and Spearhead would have it no other way. This troopers other capacity was that of an animal trainer for the team. He often brought along his trained bobcat, Max to use as an early warning system. He and Max had a good rapport together. Max would sniff out the bad guys and Spearhead would take them out. Max was getting old, though; this op was going to be hairy and Spearhead knew it. He had left his orange companion at home, and now, as the jagged rocks and the muddy shore of the island rushed closer, the point man knew he had made the right decision. He glanced back at the L.C.T. behind him, and could barely make out the bundle of troops and armament crammed into a tight space. Everyone was still and silent, all lights blacked out along the large, narrow ship. He could vaguely make out the long barrel of the Mauler, and the round cannon atop the AWE Striker. The missile racks on the Wolverine were pointed up into the air and he could make those out rather clearly as well. The troops themselves were another story, as they were all huddled around the vehicles, crouched and silent, almost willing themselves to be invisible. Spearhead turned back around just as the L.C.T. bore down on the eastern shore. With a series of muffled crunches, the bow of the large boat slammed into the shoreline, digging a ragged trench through the soft muddy beach and smashing numerous rocks and pebbles under the thick hull. The boat lurched with the sudden halt in momentum, but Spearhead kept his balance, his fingers twitching with anticipation against the cold steel of his assault rifle. His muscles tensed as the L.C.T. came to a shuddering halt against the rigid shoreline. The craft finally came to a rest and Spearhead went into action, throwing himself gracefully from the bow of the ship. He hit the beach in a low crouch, his combat boots sinking into the mucky beach sand. There were no white, sandy beaches here, only rocks and mud…no umbrellas, crystal clear waters or beachfront resorts. Only gun emplacements, lumpy dunes and terrorists. Spearhead squinted at the misformed sand dunes in front of him; they blocked the beach from the wet grass beyond, but seemed to be uninhabited. Spearhead had expected resistance. Torpedo and Topside hadn’t been quiet about wiping out the ASP emplacements, so he knew Cobra knew that an attack was coming.

*So where is everyone?* Spearhead thought to himself. He waved the large rifle in a slight arc in front of him, covering the entire vacant beach on which he had landed. A cool stream of liquid suddenly slid down the back of his neck. He wondered if it was sweat or the first lone raindrop, testing the waters for its numerous brothers. The similarity between him and the raindrop was too obvious to miss and he cast an eye slightly upward to see if the storm had begun. He only saw the muzzle flash out of the corner of his eye, and the silenced shot was like a whisper in the cool night. He tensed, but could do nothing as the shot plowed into his chest, sending the ammo belt scattering apart and dropping to the wet sand below. Spearhead was thrown backwards with the force of the shot, his eyes wide and confused, pain roaring through every fiber of his being. He looked in confusion at the dunes ahead, realizing that the shot had come from the dune itself. No wonder there were no troops on the beach or the dunes…they were *inside them*.

“Man down! Man down!” the voices echoed as his back bounced roughly against the beach sand, splattering dirty mud all around. Boots struck the beach all around him as the Joes departed from the boat and began the Cobra Island assault. Hit & Run was the first to drop to the ground, his small AR-15 gripped in his green camouflaged fists. He brought the weapon to his eye and rattled off a quick barrage towards the dunes. Outback followed close behind in a dark gray t-shirt and equally dark khaki pants. He held a small submachine gun in his hands as well and immediately sprayed the dunes with small arms fire. With a shout, a large group of Eels blasted from the dunes, their gray, black and red uniforms barely visible in the dim light. Half of them carried silenced machine guns, the other half large bore assault rifles, and each group began opening fire as soon as they escaped their sandy bunkers. Hit & Run and Outback hit the dirt as gunfire tore towards them, peppering the thick hull of the L.C.T. behind them. Bullets twanged and pounded off the metal hide of the ship, keeping the rest of the troops inside. Hit & Run made a quick count of twelve, and Outback confirmed that. The two men looked over at Spearhead who lay prone, his brown vest now soaking with dark crimson. They hugged the wet ground, bullets whipping just above their heads and slapping into the thick beach around them. Hit & Run brought his AR-15 around, squinting through the two sights perched on top of the weapon. The vague shadow of a standing figure filled the triangular sight picture and he hauled back on the trigger, keeping the throttling weapon under tight control as he riddled the figure with 5.56-millimeter gunfire. Outback rolled to his left and sprang up on one knee as his cover was annihilated by gunfire, and returned the favor by dropping two Eels with a sporadic, but well aimed burst. Suddenly a figure dropped down to the muck next to the Joes, and was greeted by a blast, but it was off the mark.

“Lifeline!” shouted Bullhorn, who was perched on the bow just above. “This is a free fire zone!”

Lifeline crouched down next to the fallen Joe. “I’ll remember that when you’re bleeding in the sand, Bullhorn!” the medic replied, ducking down as gunfire ricocheted off of the skin of the L.C.T. Bullhorn shouted something incoherent and rose up, drawing the fire. A long, slender German made machine gun was tucked firmly under his arm, the long scope pressed to his open eye. Bullets collided with the boat and hurtled past the Joe, but his brown camouflage face remained unfazed as he roared off a well-directed path of cover fire. Two more Eels were thrown carelessly to the wet ground, and the return fire slowed dramatically. Bullhorn dropped down as gunfire pounded the bow of the boat and tore up the metal rail where he had just been standing.

“They’re keeping us pinned!” Bullhorn shouted. “Just keeping us here until reinforcements show up.”

“Then we need to end this pronto!” Gung Ho said, coming up from the cockpit in a low crouch.

“You’re the team leader, Gung Ho. What do you say?” asked Zap, his bazooka cradled in his arm.

“I say you better be saving that for the heavy stuff,” Gung Ho said, motioning to the rocket launcher. More gunfire blasted from the darkness, returned by frantic fire from the Joes on the beach.

“We got men pinned down out there!” Bullhorn shouted.

“Relax, mon ami…” Gung Ho said with certainty. “He’ll take care of it,” he motioned to the man who followed the Marine, also in a low crouch. His hat was pulled tight over his black hair, and his round face was twisted in a scowl of anger. Bullhorn and Zap smiled. The Joe stood and confidently strode to the front of the boat, seemingly undisturbed by the return fire. Standing confidently at the bow, he lifted his large stedi-cam machine gun, which was attached firmly to his hip by a mechanical contraption. His fingers flexed around the angular handle as his other hand wrapped around the second handle, about halfway up the long gun’s magazine. Sparks flew as small caliber arms fire rained down at the Army Ranger who stood there. A smile flashed over his round face as he yanked back the trigger, unloading a deafening blast of large bore fire. Yellow sparks erupted in an immense blast of flame as the weapon roared with the anger felt by its operator. Large bullets ripped through the ground and pounded the group of Eels, who were crouched by the dunes. Five of them jerked and were thrown to the ground, and the remaining two stood suddenly and ran, barely escaping the fury of the heavy machine gun.

“Nice shooting, Repeater!” Zap shouted, pounding his comrade on the shoulder, which was padded by a thick bulletproof vest, light green in color. It blended fairly well with the tan and brown camo scheme on the rest of the uniform.

“Like shooting ducks in a barrel,” the machine gunner said, smiling.

“Congratulations can wait! Lifeline!” Gung Ho shouted, leaning over the edge. “How’s Spearhead?”

Lifeline looked up as he finished dressing the wound. “Bullet was armor piercing. Could have been a lot worse though. He’s breathing, anyway.”

“That’s good enough for me. Can he hold out until we can get transport to the Flagg?”

“I think so, yes. I will have to monitor his condition.”

“All right. Hit & Run, Outback! You guys and Lifeline rig up a stretcher for our boy. The rest of you maggots!” he shouted, turning to the other Joes still in the L.C.T. “Let’s get this stuff unloaded! Move it! Move it!” his face was beet red and his mouth formed into a snarl under his thick brown moustache.

“Yes, sir!” the return shout cried and the Joes sprang into action. The first main conflict had been a small one, but the beach was theirs and the campaign was starting on a good note.

The two Eels ran swiftly through the wet grass, their breath coming in hurried gasps, and legs pumping furiously.

“Eel Nine!” shouted the Eel who was lagging slightly behind. The lead Eel slowed and turned to face the other.

“Yes, sir?” he asked Eel One, the squad leader for the first group of Eels.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded, motioning back to the beach. “We agreed on a coordinated ambush! You fired early and blew the whole plan!” he got in his subordinate’s face, his breath hot and distasteful against the other man’s face.

“I had him in my sights!” Nine shouted angrily.

“Your desire to get a kill got ten men taken out! You had NO right to fire early!” he jabbed a finger into the Nine’s chest. Number One stormed off ahead. “The Commander will punish you for this,” he hissed as he passed.

“And who’s going to tell him, Eel One?” Eel Nine asked. Number One turned as Eel Nine presented a nine-millimeter automatic. The squad leader’s eyes grew wide as the pistol erupted point blank into his forehead. Eel Nine chuckled and ran off towards the Citadel.

The jungle was nearly silent underneath the moist air, the only noises made by insects and small wildlife. Recondo pushed aside a thin branch and ducked underneath another as he led the group on a winding path through the thick brush. They had been walking for almost half an hour, and still had no sign of the person they were supposed to meet. Recondo flashed a silent signal, which got passed down the line to Falcon, Duke, Beachhead, Muskrat, Ripcord and Stalker, who was bringing up the rear. Each man stopped and crouched low, taking a few minutes to be quiet and scan the area to make sure there was no one following. Stalker twisted his head left and right, and lifted his arm to peel back a black glove and check the time. Suddenly a hand clamped over his mouth and pulled tight, the other hand forcing his dark arm back down. Stalker felt his head being turned around until he was face to face with a man he had never seen. A deadly serious, mustached man, his face shrouded in camouflage paint, a Fritz helmet pulled over his head, covered by masking foliage. He removed a hand from Stalker’s arm and placed a single finger to his tight lips, signaling silence. Slowly, his other hand drew back from Stalker’s confused face and changed into an index finger directing his vision into the jungle, not ten feet away. The Army Ranger turned and looked in that direction, and could just barely make out the shadows of a small team of Night-Vipers slithering through the jungle like the snakes that they were. He tapped Ripcord on the shoulder, who had heard none of this, then directed him to the group, telling him to pass the message on. It went on down the line and everyone stayed stock still in a low crouch, just waiting for the men to pass on by. The ten minutes seemed like an eternity but the Night-Vipers continued their patrol and the Joes stood again, huddling in a small group.

“We’re clear,” the man in the moustache said to the confused group. “They’ve beefed up security in the past hour. We’ve got to be careful,” he said simply and very softly. He began to walk, brushing past the Joes, but Duke wrapped a firm grip around his shoulder.

“Hey, bucko,” he whispered. “Before we follow you through the gates of hell, you want to tell us who you are?” The man turned slightly.

“I’m a Joe and I’ve been living off bugs and leaves for over a week here. That’s all you have to know.” The man continued to walk, almost becoming invisible against the green and brown surroundings. He wore a dark vest over camouflage fatigues. A simple enough uniform, but very effective for its purpose. Duke shook his head and quickened his pace to catch up.

“In case no one informed you, pal, I’m the Top for this little operation.”

“I know who you are, Duke,” the man said quietly as they walked, flanked single file by the other six Joes. “I’ve been living in this stinkhole for too long. Got dropped off here before this whole thing got really messy. I know this jungle by now. Want to get to the snakes alive, I’m in the lead.”

Duke scowled, but remembered Hawk’s orders. Whatever this man said, take as fact. He knew his stuff and was super qualified. Duke wasn’t too sure about this guy, but he was sure about his Commanding Officer. If Hawk had this much faith in this guy, then that was good enough for him.

“You want it, you got it, Joe. Wanna at least give me a name?” Duke asked quietly, walking up just behind the mystery man.

“You can call me Claymore, Sergeant. That’s all you need to know.”

Duke nodded and fell into line behind the mysterious trooper. A few more minutes passed and Claymore flashed a silent signal ordering everyone to halt. He pointed to Duke and waved him forward. Duke followed and found himself at the end of the thick jungle. Just ahead, two large structures sat. At one point they were hangers on the Cobra Airfield, but now they were dilapidated husks, more holes than surface, all broken down and pretty much useless. The cracked and smashed runway ran along behind the hangers, and Duke could make out a one-time control tower that loomed over the other buildings. The tower was cracked in half and toppled over, but the half that was standing still stood tall and proud, even at half height. The glass windows were shattered out and sprinkled the ground, but the lower half of the tower seemed intact and solid. The perfect spot for cover. Duke signaled to Falcon who trotted up to join them.

“You were down here during the Cobra Civil War, Lieutenant. Any advice?” he asked, jerking his head towards the airfield.

“Yeah. The control tower is a great recon spot. Even at half height, we should be able to get a good glance of the island and troop placement.” Low gunfire echoed over the cool air of the island, coming from the eastern shoreline. Falcon and Duke exchanged glances. It had begun.

“Orders, Top?” Claymore asked, shifting his Uzi to his firing hand.

“You’re the lead, Claymore,” Duke said smugly.

“Only in the jungle, Top. We’re in your land now.” He didn’t smile at Duke’s little attempt at humor.

“All right. You know the guard’s routine…what’s our timeline, trooper?” he asked the grim man in camouflage. The mustached man glanced at his watch quickly.

“Under normal security parameters, we’d have about twenty minutes before the next pass.”

Duke squinted at the ruined hangers not twenty feet away. There was a pair of them at the end of the runway, and the control tower was about a hundred yards beyond that. Making it to the hangers was not a problem. But the path to the tower was relatively long and open. Not much cover.

“What have you observed tonight?” Duke asked in a low whisper.

“Well, the security teams have all been doubled. Safe to assume their routes are altered as well. Still, even with double coverage, we should have about ten minutes.”

“Plenty of time,” Duke said. The moon was peeking out from behind the rolling clouds and the airfield was temporally illuminated. “Claymore, you’ve got the lead. Everyone else, fall in behind us,” Duke continued, gesturing towards the other Joes. “Silent signals until we’ve taken the tower, understood?”

The remaining team members nodded affirmative and tensed their muscles for movement. Duke held up a hand, kept it still for a few moments, then jabbed it forward briskly, and Claymore darted for the hanger. The sergeant followed close behind with each other Joe hot on his heels. The slowed to a shuffle once they reached the hangers and moved swiftly, but silently, their feet brushing past each other and carrying them along at an angle facing the southern treeline. The hanger behind them was nothing more than a shell. The foundation was present and by some miracle a majority of the roof was held on by thin shards of wall, but a large portion of the surrounding walls were jagged chunks, and not solid. There was a good deal more empty space then wall, which worked well for visibility but was not good if they needed cover. Claymore approached the end of the hanger, and then stopped suddenly, holding a halt sign up with his right hand. Duke cast him a confused glance, but stopped as well, and each man came to a rest in line. The First Sergeant studied the man in front of him who remained standing completely still and unmoving, almost like an amazingly well crafted statue of a modern day soldier. His muscles were all tensed, but stayed still, and his eyes squinted almost shut as if he was willing his vision to pierce through the thick blackness of night. Duke’s heart raced in his chest as his eyes darted around, searching for the source of this strange man’s worried appearance. He saw none. A thin bead of sweat formed from nowhere on Claymore’s temple, just under his helmet, then melted into a more liquid form and rippled down his solid jawbone, then clung to his chin as if holding for dear life. Its hold was not strong and it plummeted and spattered like a tiny salty raindrop on the grassy ground below. His body did not move. Duke’s eyes focused and re-focused as he stood there, the seconds ticking by like hours. Time had frozen still except for his heart, which continued its frantic marathon just underneath his skin. His vision became well accustomed to the dark surroundings even as the moon crawled back underneath its cloudy blanket. Had he not been focusing so intently on the surrounding areas, he would not have noticed them. They were hanging there, suspended in the air as if my magical force, and were clearly what had Claymore so concerned. Duke stood at just the right angle to see them clearly and cleanly…they were dimly translucent and arrow-straight. They pierced the air, and yet were held there as if wrapped up in the very air’s warm embrace. The low brightness appeared from nowhere, just beginning from about ten feet from the treeline, and stopping when it struck the wall of the hanger, leaving an ever so tiny red mark…the mark a career soldier and long time military person learned to recognize and even fear. There wasn’t only one, but a small group of them…eight or nine, Duke wasn’t sure, but they were there and it was bad news. He could not tell where they originated from, but he could clearly see where they ended, only mere feet from the front of the line. And they were moving. There was someone in the trees, Duke finally realized. Someone…with laser sights.

“Status report, Tele-Viper!” Destro shouted as he stormed towards the radar screen. His more regal uniform had been traded in for his normal black leather and silver mask, with no cape, gold trim or extravagant sword. He was adjusting the launcher on his right wrist and scowled underneath the metal mask.

“The Eel ambush failed miserably, Lord Destro,” he said quickly. “We have one survivor who reported in, but he reports heavy fire on the beach.”

“Blast!”

“We dispatched a small group of three HISS Tanks to counter, but have not heard a status report.”

“Very well. Follow up that group with another armored column. I want ten HISSes, five Stingers and some Ferrets. We must nip this in the bud before it escalates!”

“Might I suggest an air strike, sir?”

“Our Air Force is still severely depleted, Tele-Viper…let’s leave that as a trump card, shall we?”

“As you wish.”

“With that armored column send in a small recon team…Night-Vipers. I want to know who we’re dealing with here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Destro hunched over and glared at the radar. Hot spots were blinking in a bright green blob. “Anything from the southwest yet?”

“Negative. The Techno-Vipers found nothing wrong with the radar. It is now functioning normally.”

“Scramble that team of mixed Vipers. I want two Vipers, a HEAT Viper, two Frag Vipers and an Incinerator.”

“Already done, sir. They are dispatching through our secret exit at the airfield.”

“Excellent.” Destro stood again and crossed his arms, his mind racing. As the minutes passed he grew more uncertain of their plan of action, and more certain of whom they were dealing with. Neither revelation left him the least bit pleased. However, things were still progressing well, and with any luck twenty-four hours from now, he’d be in the Amazon and the East Coast would be in ruin. Then the real excitement would begin.

“Our cover is blown!” Claymore shouted emphatically. “Move move move!” he spun to his right just as sparks danced along the surface of the hanger wall, throwing small chunks of debris into the night air. The muffled rattles of silenced weapons ripped through the treeline and the other Joes dove for cover. Claymore threw himself backwards, slipping through a large hole in the side of the hanger and rolling to the floor inside, as bullets peppered the wall where he had been standing. He brought himself up onto one knee and lifted his Uzi, squinting carefully through the sight picture, and aiming through a gaping hole in the wall just in front of him. Around him he heard the other Joes following his actions and diving for cover inside the skeletal remains of the airplane hangar. The man in the moustache hauled back on the trigger, spraying machine gun fire into the trees. Silence descended, but only for a moment as the other troops reestablished their positions and began return fire.

“Stalker!” Duke demanded and the Army Ranger ran in a low crouch to where his sergeant was ducked down behind minimal cover. Bullets zipped through the cracks and holes in the walls and skimmed over the man in the beret as he shuffled over the floor.

“Yes, sir?” he asked over the din of gunfire which now surrounded them. Duke was amazed at how quickly the silent and serene night could be transformed into a blazing, deafening war zone.

“I want you, Beachhead and Recondo to start laying down some cover fire. The rest of you guys,” he shouted motioning to the other Joes, “are coming with me to the tower.” More ricochets drove the Joes to the floor as little pieces of hanger wall rained down upon them. “If we slip through the other side of the hanger and stick to the long grass we should be all right.” The Joes nodded, but waited for further instruction. “Once we have the tower,” Duke continued, “then we can rain on their parade from there and cover your escape,” he said this last fact motioning to Stalker and the other two. Claymore slapped another clip into his Uzi and began firing again. A rather decent collection of spent shell casings was already building up near his right knee.

“Where do you want me, Top?” he asked as he roared nine-millimeter bullets into the trees ahead.

“You’re with us,” he replied. “I want you to bring up the flank.”

“Yes, sir,” Claymore said, lowering his weapon as he drained another clip.

“What are you boys waiting for?” Stalker screamed, glaring at Recondo and Beachhead. “Let’s give them some cover fire!”

“Yes, sir!” they replied and spun around to face out into the trees from the sparse cover of the broken down structure. Duke waved his hand and he and the other Joes took off, swiftly engulfed by the dark night. Stalker pressed his starlight scope to his open eye, and switched it over to thermal mode, smiling as green, human shaped blobs floated into focus.

“We’ve got five of ‘em boys!” he shouted as he scanned the trees. “Look like Night-Vipers. An extra patrol…bad luck for them.” He pumped the trigger twice and was satisfied by one of the green blobs jerking, then falling to the mossy forest floor.

“That’s gonna take too long, sir!” Beachhead shouted, grinning menacingly behind his knit mask. “We don’t want backup coming.” He plucked a grenade from his black vest, which held numerous supplies of extra ammunition for his assault rifle. Yanking the pin, he stood for a moment, and then hurled the small round object through a hole in the wall, towards the trees beyond. Gunfire erupted suddenly and Beachhead dropped, the hurling bullets skimming just above.

“Not too smart, Beach,” Recondo said laughing. “I guess the Rangers aren’t sticklers on intelligence, huh?” he laughed. He pumped his shotgun to load a shell into the chamber, then lifted it and blasted off a loud shot.

“Watch your mouth, jungle-boy!” Stalker shouted, squeezing off another small burst. “You’re outnumbered here.”

The grenade went off with a muffled boom and several startled shouts echoed from the forest. Stalker peered through his sight and frowned.

“Still four left. You scared ‘em, Beachhead, but that’s all.”

“Dang,” Recondo growled. “We’re gonna be here all night. There’s no time for this!” he jumped to his feet and darted off as the gunshots plowed through the wall and ripped apart the air where he was standing.

“Recondo!” Stalker shouted as the man in tan and green camouflage disappeared into the woods just beyond the hangers.

Beachhead shook his head slowly. “And he called me stupid, huh?” With a huff he ejected the spent clip, slipped one from his vest and slammed it home. “Anyway, didn’t Recondo go to Ranger school at Benning?” he asked, lifting the assault rifle and firing into the trees. His words trembled slightly as the kickback from the weapon shook his whole body. There was now a thick haze in the air from the gun-smoke and steaming shell casings, which littered the floor of the hanger.

“Conserve the ammo, Beachhead,” Stalker said lowly. “They’ve dug in behind the trees.”

“All right…now where’s our cover?” Beachhead asked, glancing over towards the tower. “They should be there by now.”

“After all this time in this man’s army, and you haven’t learned yet? Man, Beachhead, only person you can rely on out here is you. Your buddies may save your skin, but always be ready to save your own. Hold up,” he said suddenly.

“What’s up?” Beachhead asked, drawing closer. Stalker moved his starlight scope slightly.

“We’ve got another one out there. Joining his buddies behind the trees.” A fifth green blob slipped skillfully through the trees as it approached the group of Night Vipers. As Stalker watched, the blob moved swiftly and charged in, something in its hand. “What the—“ Stalker asked as the figure darted towards the others. The first man stood quickly, but the fifth man’s arm lashed out and dropped him quick. The splash of blood was a bizarre bright streak in the thermal scope Stalker peered through. He could make out the object in his hand now as a machete…and whoever this was good with it. A second Night Viper jumped to his feet, but was cut down before even fully standing. As he hit the ground, the mystery man spun and lifted a weapon that had been hanging by his side. Before the last two Night Vipers could even draw weapons, a pair of shotgun blasts echoed through the jungle and as Stalker looked on, the two Cobra soldiers were thrown viciously back by the shots. Mere seconds had passed, and the whole team of night fighters had been wiped out.

“Clear!” came the familiar voice from the treeline.

Stalker and Beachhead faced each other and chuckled.

“Recondo!” Stalker shouted, exiting the hanger with Beachhead close behind. “Where’d you learn to fight like that?”

“Believe me, Stalker,” Recondo replied, wiping the blade of his machete with the bottom edge of his tan shirt. “Some of the places I’ve lived make the most nasty jungles look downright civilized.” They all shared a laugh, but Stalker’s face turned serious.

“Let’s head to the tower, boys…things are taking a little too long.” The other two nodded and fell in behind their squad leader in a brisk run towards the half-tower that sat at the north edge of the airfield. Stalker noticed immediately that the main set of double doors was closed. He used silent signals to direct Beachhead and Recondo to one side of them, and he quickly moved in and pressed his back firmly against the wall on the other side. He drew in a breath, lifted his rifle and held up three fingers. He dropped the fingers to two, then one, and held it, then clenched his fist and pumped it once. Recondo moved in first, pulling his knee tight into his chest. He thrust his thick combat boot forward, which collided with the door with a loud thud, sending the double doors flying open. The GI Joe jungle trooper immediately dropped to one knee, his shotgun firmly grasped, and his eyes stern. Beachhead and Stalker whipped themselves around into the opening, their weapons trained and ready to open fire. Duke looked sternly at them as they burst in, and they immediately knew something else had gone wrong. The whole team was there, all five of them, looking to be in good health. Only problem was, their hands were tied behind their backs and thick black cloths were stuffed in each one of their mouths. Stalker’s mouth dropped open to ask if they were all right when the unmistakable cold steel pressed firmly against the side of his neck. His eyes darted around as Cobra Vipers appeared from all directions, seemingly from out of nowhere. The last place his eyes wandered was directly to his left where he immediately recognized the holder of the weapon.

“Welcome to Cobra Island, GI Joe,” Zartan hissed through clenched teeth. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy your very long stay.”

# CHAPTER SIX

**Storm Front**

A misleading silence had settled over the eastern beach. The slightest twinge of gun smoke…an acrid, metallic stench…still filled the air, but the echoes of automatic fire and the thunder of artillery shells had faded from the shore. Not much time had passed, but already a makeshift bivouac had been erected, flanked by two tall metal spotlights, each one bathing the area in a bright glow. The camp was set up where the mucky sand met the tall grass on a fairly dry spot. The surrounding area looked like what it was…basically, a war zone. The Eels had been disposed of, but the smoldering husks of three HISS Tanks were much harder to conceal. Their position was actually beneficial to the small assault force, as the smashed and burned tank wreckage made for good cover from enemy fire. Just to the right of the charred barricade, the Wolverine sat at a slight angle, its twin missile launchers still full and gazing longingly into the darkness. The MBT Mauler was on the other side of the mangled HISS’s; it’s engine and weapons cooling after the heated exchange that had left the three tanks in their present conditions. One of the small hatches near the front of the tan, streamlined tank was open and Bazooka sat on the front of the machine, glaring down at a deep black streak that ran along the side of the vehicle. It had only been a glancing shot, but had rocked the tank just the same. Had Zap not been right in the thick of it with his RPG, Bazooka may have been the first fatality of this particular campaign. The tank driver held his green helmet on his lap and glanced over at his own portable rocket launcher that lay on the tank next to him. Once again his mind wandered to the small group of fellow recruits who had joined up with him. The small group that was now whittled down to him and Airtight. Before that fateful mission in Benzheen, he had thought himself and all his buddies near invincible. Sure, Joes had paid the price before then…General Flagg, whom he had never met, but had heard the legends; Mangler, a young kid…too young…died in the desert on his first op. But this was different. These were his boys…nothing could happen to them. It was amazing how one week could change so much. He hung his head, slowly stroking his thick black moustache.

“’Zooka!” came a shout, just to his right. He turned and smiled when he saw his buddy looking up at him.

“What’s up, Alpine?” he asked, placing his green helmet firmly back over his dark tussled hair.

“Gung Ho’s starting the briefing…let’s go, m’man!”

Bazooka dropped himself from the tank to the soft ground below, scooping up his rocket launcher by its long, leather strap. The night was dark and silent. Eerily silent, especially since only moments before, heavy artillery and machine gunfire had torn the night apart. Bazooka glanced over at Cover Girl, who remained in her seat. They were taking turns at the briefing station. There was no reason to leave them completely unguarded. The Joe rocket specialist and tank driver walked slowly to where Gung Ho sat, studying the map in front of him with an almost frightening intensity. Clutch was standing just to his left, glancing over his shoulder, and running a greasy palm over his ever present five o’clock shadow. Spearhead lay in a makeshift cot at the rear of the hastily constructed structure with Lifeline doting over him. His eyes were open, but they were glassy and unsure of what was happening around them. Outback and Airtight stood a few feet away, their arms crossed and eyes intent on the Marine as he studied the best course of action.

“All right, boys,” Gung Ho said, without looking up. “You guys are the first shift. I’m gonna be short and sweet so you can stand watch and let the others come listen to my little speech.” He finally lifted his head and all present narrowed their gaze on the squad leader.

“Now, I’m not sure how much time we have before the snakes launch another little attack. They obviously were unprepared for us, but don’t expect the same luxury next time. We’ve all dealt with Cobra before…they are fast learners. We dispatched a group of three HISS Tanks, next time, they’ll send thirty. We must be ready for that.”

“Yes, sir,” the surrounding troops said quietly.

“All right, I just got off the horn with Dial Tone aboard the Whale. They’ve hit a storm front, which is following them inward. Things are gonna get windy and wet real fast, so we need to move quick. This little squall will delay their approach by about an hour, but that does not alter our timetable.” His eyes were narrow slits and the normally jovial Cajun was now in a serene state of dead-seriousness. “It is our job to make sure that the beach position is held at all costs. However, we must also create a wedge through Cobra’s defenses to allow Team Alpha a clear shot at Cobra Command Central. Things just got a little trickier, but by no means impossible. We’re GI Joes, gentlemen! We’re paid to improvise.”

“Yes, sir!” came the enthusiastic, if somewhat muffled reply.

“Now, this is where the satellite photo picked up Cobra Commander.” He jabbed a thick finger at the cluster of dead buildings in the center of Cobra Island. A large red ‘X’ was marked where the citadel stood. “Now, gentlemen, there is a lot of land between us and them, but we have mapped a good route, just south of the volcano.” Gung Ho showed a dotted line that passed just under the large landmark almost in the dead center of the island. “This will give us guaranteed cover to the north, only leaving us three sides to defend. Theoretically, we’ll be leaving nothing standing behind us, so the west and south will be our only open sides, until we reach the central command area. Once we reach that area, the two teams will merge and Hawk will assume command. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” came the now reflexive reply.

“All right. We’ve got no time to waste, Joes! Go relieve the others for briefing. We move out smartly in fifteen! Remember, we must put ourselves between the snakes and the beach at all costs. If Cobra guesses what we’re up to, the whole op is up in smoke. Everything is in nature’s hands now.” As if to respond, a low, guttural growl bellowed deep inside the dark cloud cover overhead. Gung Ho glanced up around the roof of the bivouac and winced as a yellow flash streaked through the sky overhead. A few small splats of salty rainwater struck him just under the green bandana wrapped tightly around his bald head. He shook his head slowly, wondering why everything had to go wrong at once. Before he could voice his opinion, the old team had left and Cover Girl, Hit & Run, Zap, Bullhorn and Repeater replaced them, ready to hear the bad news.

The hallway was like a narrow artery running shallow under the dirt and concrete skin of the island, leading directly to the heart of this large, unfeeling beast. Stalker glanced around at his surroundings, marveling at how well crafted the hallway was. It was cylindrical in shape; the walls formed by what seemed like poured concrete, and led off into the darkness. Small, singular light bulbs were placed sporadically along the walls, enough to keep it lit, but not nearly enough to drive away the mysterious shadows and frightening dark figures that danced along the smooth walls. The eight Joes walked slowly in a small group, surrounded by their captors…Zartan walked calmly at the front of the platoon of Vipers, flanked by three of the Dreadnoks, Buzzer, Ripper, and Torch. Just behind them, two Vipers strode with confidence, their features undistinguishable underneath the silver plated masks. Each one looked to be built like a solid brick house, shoulders broad, covered by black flack vests and the unmistakable dark blue uniforms. Surrounding the Joes was a sampling of Cobra’s forces, the team of mixed Vipers that Destro had dispatched. The two Frag Vipers stood at each side of the group, their claw-like grenade launchers hung loosely from their backpacks. Instead, they carried small automatic weapons, thin and slender, with short magazines and no stocks. A long clip extended from just behind the barrel and each gun was trained on the Joe captives. Flanking the prisoners was a HEAT Viper on the right, his arm mounted missile launcher loaded and ready. Even though his face was hidden by the half silver, half yellow facemask, the Joes had a good idea of what was expressed beneath. His yellow and purple uniform stretched over his large frame, and the missiles rattled lightly against his leather boots as he stomped over the metal floor. An Incinerator flanked the other side, the dim light reflecting and refracting off of his smooth red faceplate and silver helmet. He wore the familiar red quilted uniform of the Cobra flamethrower, and had said flamethrower leveled at the men in chains. Ripcord was first in line, his wrists bound tight by handcuffs, as were all of them. Beachhead, Muskrat and Falcon were in a small group walking next, followed by Claymore and Recondo. Duke and Stalker pulled up the rear, striding slowly next to each other. The Army Ranger leaned over slightly and whispered at his commanding officer.

“What happened, Duke?” he asked.

“I don’t know Stalker,” Duke started, whispering quietly. “We had taken the tower, and were spreading out to make sure we had control over it. Suddenly, these goons were everywhere. Appeared out of nowhere…most likely came out that secret entrance they just led us back down.”

“Do you know how to get us out of h—“ Stalker started to reply.

“Shut up, Joe, or we’ll gag you again!” shouted the HEAT Viper, poking Stalker roughly in the kidneys with the business end of his rocket launcher. The Ranger stumbled slightly, and Duke grabbed his arm with his cuffed hands and helped him back up. At the sound, Ripcord turned and glared at the Cobra troops behind him. Suddenly, the concession halted, Zartan noticing the disturbance.

“Head forward, Joe!” he screamed at Ripcord, grabbing him roughly by the collar. Zartan’s free hand still clutched the automatic pistol he had been carrying. The master of disguise cocked his head slightly as he looked at the Joe. “You look…familiar,” he said slowly. Ripcord merely stared a hole in him.

“Gor, Zartan! I remember,” said Buzzer, smiling. He pushed himself in close, and Zartan relinquished his grasp. “This is that lad wot impersonated you while the Joes had yeh captured at The Pit!”

Zartan smiled. “So it is.” He pressed the barrel of his pistol roughly into the Joe’s nostril. “Now the tables are turned, yes?”

“Ha! This here is the fair haired lovesick Joey, whose girlfriend I ran off with!” Buzzer pointed out, laughing. “Wot was her name again?” Buzzer asked, poking a finger into Ripcord’s ribs. “I was so busy kidnapping her, I done forgot.”

“Candy,” Ripcord said through tightly clenched teeth, his eyes narrow and drilling through the blonde Dreadnok’s face.

“Oh yeh! Candy…how could I forget that?” Buzzer was smiling widely at this Joes obvious discomfort.

“Buzzer…perhaps now is not the ti—“ Zartan said.

“Yeh know wot, Joey?” Buzzer asked in a harsh whisper, bringing his face dangerously close to the Joe captive. The two Vipers grabbed Ripcord’s cuffed hands and held them firm behind his back. They seemed to be enjoying this. “I was there, yeh know…when she bought the farm.” Buzzer’s face twisted into an obnoxious sneer, and his breath blew unpleasantly into Ripcord’s face.

Veins immediately raised along Ripcord’s neck as he strained to keep himself calm.

“That was a mighty big missile…I bet there weren’t enough left of ‘er to even bury.” He breathed heavily into the Joe HALO Jumper’s face, which was contorted into a scowl of rage. The veins throbbed just under the skin’s surface, threatening to break free and strangle the Dreadnok themselves. Ripcord’s breathing was ragged and pounding in his lungs, coming out in harsh, forced gasps, and his eyes were squinted almost to the point of being closed.

“Ripcord…don’t do it, buddy,” Recondo said, trying to calm the young man down. The paratrooper cast a sideways glance to his fellow Joe and forced himself to relax, his shoulders untensing and his breath slowing back to normal. Buzzer smirked sardonically and the Vipers loosened their grip ever so slightly. Ripcord drew in a long, calming, deep breath, then lunged. He moved with such sudden quickness that he slipped out of the Vipers grasp like melted butter over a metal surface. Buzzer’s eyes grew impossibly wide underneath his dark sunglasses as the camouflage covered GI Joe slammed into him, shoulder first, driving him backwards. Ripcord screamed loudly, nothing coherent, and drew his knee up into his chest, then drove it with great force into Buzzer’s ribs. The Dreadnok exhaled sharply through pursed lips, and flew back against the smooth wall behind him, his sunglasses clattering to the floor. Ripcord glanced back as the other two Dreadnoks charged. He whipped his leg back and caught Torch in the upper chest, throwing him roughly to the ground. Ripper wrapped his arms around the Joe, but he shifted his weight, and lurched forward, tossing the mohawked punk over his shoulder and skidding over the floor. Buzzer had dropped to his knees and was clutching at his stomach, and breathing haggardly.

“Piece of scum!” Ripcord shouted and whipped his foot up, slamming into Buzzer’s frowning face. The Dreadnok was whipped back, and smacked the back of his head off of the concrete wall behind him. His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped into unconsciousness. But Ripcord was not done. He charged forward, cocking his leg back and readying for another strike, until an iron grip clutched his shoulder and stopped him in mid lunge. He felt himself being spun roughly around until he was face to pupiless, painted face with Zartan, who glared menacingly at him.

“Impressive, Joe,” he bellowed. “Beating on three Dreadnoks while your hands are cuffed behind your back. Very nice…but Buzzer has learned his lesson. Playtime is over.”

Ripcord shouted and whipped his right leg around, but Zartan effortlessly knocked it aside.

“It would do you well to remember, Joe,” Zartan hissed, and slammed his right fist dead center into Ripcord’s face. “We have tussled before, you and I.” He pounded his left into the camouflage ribs of the paratrooper, who dropped to his knees. “And I beat you then as well.” He drew his large leg back, the brown cloth pants straining with the motion. The lights reflected off of his smooth plastic chest plate and pads sewn onto each thigh. The large black boot drilled into the Joe’s chest, knocking him back first against the hard metal floor. “Beating three Dreadnoks and defeating me are two entirely different things.” He pounded his other leg into Ripcord’s ribs as he lay there, just for good measure. As the young Joe groaned, Zartan turned to the other prisoners, held tightly by the Cobra team. It was taking great force, but the group of Vipers were holding the Joes at bay. “Anyone else want to be lying and bleeding on the floor?” he asked.

“Just try us, Zartan!” Recondo spat. Zartan returned the challenge with a chuckle.

“I have had enough entertainment today.” He turned to the Dreadnoks. “Ripper, Torch, get Buzzer cleaned up. You,” he turned and pointed a finger at the Vipers, “get these Joes in one of the cells. I am going to get Gulag. I’m sure he would like some…words with these gentlemen.” With that said, he turned and practically vanished into the darkened corridor. The lead Viper picked up Ripcord roughly, and dragged him to his feet.

“Move it, boys!” the HEAT Viper shouted, motioning with his launcher. The Joes, against their very nature, acquiesced and were led to the detention area for interrogation.

The quiet rumble of thunder was now an almost deafening pounding. The rain had not yet begun in earnest, but the clouds and very heavens were shaken with the force of the rolls of thunder, almost threatening to throttle the sky to thousands of dark, dull gray pieces. A yellow streak rushed across the base of the cloud cover, illuminating the ground below briefly. Drops of rain were falling, but at irregular intervals. They were large, sloppy clumps of water held together by invisible forces until they struck the ground and splattered apart, leaving wet blossoms on the previously dry ground. The large tan tank roared over the rocky ground, just southeast of the looming volcano, which sprouted from the island like a ragged, uneven growth. The forest was just south of the little motorcade, but there was a wide path of bare land separating the volcano and the forest. It was mostly dirt covered, with rocks large and small strewn along it. Chunks of volcano broke away on a regular basis and caused little blockades, which made the path quite a challenge to navigate. Just behind and to the right of the Mauler, the AWE Striker bounced along the rough ground. It was practically killing Clutch to drive so slowly, but if they ran into another group of HISS Tanks, he definitely wanted the Mauler between him and them. Gung Ho sat in the passenger seat of the Striker, his hand clutching the roll bar as if by reflex, simply because Clutch was driving. He glanced back at the makeshift stretcher that was erected on the back of the dune buggy. Spearhead was much more alert now, which was a good sign, and Lifeline continued to hunch over him, making sure he was comfortable. The Wolverine rolled through the path off to the Striker’s right, its missile launchers aimed upwards and out towards the darkness ahead. Zap and Airtight sat on the back of the Wolverine, their weapons placed securely over their laps. Alpine and Outback sat on the rear of the Mauler, each one of them with an automatic slung over their shoulder. Gung Ho plucked a walkie-talkie from the console of the buggy and spoke into it briefly. The Mauler and the Wolverine eased to a slow stop. Bullhorn, who was riding the RAM Motorcycle, coasted it to a stop as well.

“This the spot?” Clutch asked.

“Yeah…we give them ten minutes.” Gung Ho replied, glancing at his watch.

“No need,” a voice called out to their left. Hit & Run and Repeater trotted towards them, evidently, exiting from the treeline about fifty feet south. Gung Ho slipped from the seat and went out to meet them.

“SitRep, Hit & Run…fill me in,” he said.

“Situation Report is this: Ten HISS Tanks and Five Stingers, making a beeline for our position. They’re not far from here…we got them spotted in the goggles and ran right back.”

“Shoot! Not even enough time to set claymores or shaped charges.” Gung Ho stated, his mind already racing. He had to shout lightly to be heard above the falling rain. Storming over to the Striker, he scooped up the communicator again. “Bazooka, Cover Girl! Back those babies up and around the corner of the volcano. We’ve got company coming!” The two tracked vehicles immediately complied and went into reverse, smoothly rounding the corner of the volcano and leaving the path clear.

“Hop on, boys!” Gung Ho said, and motioned to the buggy. The engine revved and the two Joes just barely jumped on before Clutch floored it and sped off. “Clutch,” Gung Ho said to the driver, “I want you to turn off that way.” He pointed to the treeline. “See that clearing there?” There indeed was a small clearing nestled in the trees. There wasn’t much cover, but it would be very hard to see the green, wheeled vehicle against the trees. Bullhorn was hot on their heels in the motorcycle and within seconds, they were hidden from view, and the dirt path was clear. The rain started to fall.

“Well, Destro?” Cobra Commander asked, walking up to his second in command. “Status?”

Destro glanced over at his commander, hiding the look of annoyance well behind the steel mask. “We’ve got a group of HISS’s and Stingers trying to flush them out. No contact so far.”

“And?”

“And what, Commander?” he asked, turning from the radar screen.

“Shouldn’t something be happening? We’ve got intruders on my island!”

“We have to tread carefully, sir. This could be a rush attack, or it could be a well coordinated and planned assault. We have to be ready for any eventuality.”

“Destro,” the Tele Viper manning the controls said softly.

“Yes?”

“You have a call from Zartan in the detention area…line four.” He held up a receiver and Destro rolled his eyes.

“What is it, Zartan?” he asked, a hand on his hip. He listened intently for a few seconds. “Are you certain? Yes, yes…of course.” Destro was entirely focused on the call now, his body standing at rigid attention. “Now, don’t do anything rash…yes, keep them there and return to the command center. They can hold them for now.” He set the receiver down with a click and shook his head slowly. He held his weight up with one rigid arm, supporting him against the control panel.

“Well? What is it, Destro?” Cobra Commander asked.

Destro glanced around uncomfortably. “Follow me, sir,” he said and walked away, towards the center of the command room. Vipers, Tele Vipers, Techno Vipers and many other random Cobra soldiers ran frantically from one end of the command center to the other. “We have a problem,” he said finally as they neared the Commander’s large, ornate throne.

“What?”

“We’re not being attacked by the ordinary U.S. Military.”

“Don’t keep me guessing. Who are we dealing with?”

“GI Joe.”

Cobra Commander’s eyes grew wide behind his flowing, royal blue hood. “Meeting room, Destro. Now.” They stomped off towards the private meeting room. The Baroness looked up from her command post and squinted at them. She told her personal Vipers she’d be right back and walked over to the room. She slipped in the door just as Destro and Cobra Commander went in. They noticed her entrance, but said nothing.

“How can you be sure?” Cobra Commander asked, almost frantic.

“We’ve…or I should say Zartan has captured a small team of them. They all match the files we have with just one exception.”

“This is intolerable!” The Commander screamed. “We were so close!”

“Cobra Commander, there is no need for pessimism. For us not to know of this, it must be a small-scale attack. No matter who they are, we will stop them.”

“Why weren’t you told of this? Don’t you have an inside source?” Cobra Commander demanded.

“He is merely a lackey for the right organization. He cannot possibly know about everything!” Destro found himself shouting, and paused for a second to catch his breath. “But do not worry, sir. We still outnumber them…even if they are at their original strength, which they most definitely are not, we outnumber them ten to one. This will merely make our victory all the more…satisfying.”

The Commander chuckled. “You know what, Destro? You are right. How many have we captured?”

“I believe Zartan said eight of them.”

The Commander laughed out loud. “Excellent. Very well, we shall proceed.”

“Good. Now, perhaps, you should make arrangements for your personal hydrofoil, sir?” Destro asked. “We don’t want to take any chances.”

“Hogwash!” Cobra Commander shouted. “What would that do to troop morale? Their august leader turns tail and runs at the slightest hint of trouble? Nonsense!” his eyes flared and his body language became agitated. “As a matter of fact, I think it’s time we took a more hands on approach! Destro, I want a group of HISS Tanks set up along the cluster’s eastern perimeter. Just to make sure no one gets through. And I want you and The Baroness in the lead tank.”

The silence in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“What?” The Baroness asked finally.

“Is that wise?” Destro demanded.

“I think I can handle things at this end, Destro.” Cobra Commander sat confidently in his red, velvet chair.

“Very well, Commander,” Destro hissed.

“And where is Scrap Iron?” The Commander demanded as if he were ordering around a mere Viper.

“I believe he is in the motor pool, sir,” Destro replied.

“Good. Tell him I want him and his best driver in the command center immediately. We have a counter attack to propose!”

“As you wish.” Destro turned with The Baroness and departed, leaving the Commander alone. The two Immortals cast sideways glances at them as they left the room.

“You agree with this plan?” The Baroness asked harshly.

Destro merely smiled under his mask. “Do not worry, Baroness…the Joes won’t even make it past the volcano.” He chuckled as they turned towards the motor pool to get their tanks and give Scrap Iron his message.

Gung Ho pressed the goggles tightly to his eyes, desperately trying to see through the rain, which was now whipping down in a torrential downpour. Rainwater and wind thrashed through the buggy, so strong that it was almost rocked on its loose suspension. Thunder roared through the dark clouds above, followed almost immediately by jagged white-hot forks of electricity. The lightning struck with almost audible force, a slight crackling ripping the sky apart milliseconds before the flash illuminated the area down below. The Marine adjusted the magnification and finally brought the first HISS into view. It was a jet-black blur against the grayish-black background of night. A Viper sat in the turret and Gung Ho made out the vague features of the red and blue clad Track Viper sitting in the control seat. Formerly called merely a HISS Driver, these highly skilled tank pilots all adopted the Track Viper moniker when Cobra reformed itself. Two more HISS’s emerged, flanking the first on both sides and the Marine squad leader’s heart thudded in his chest. A combination of the storm and common ground clutter had most likely kept their current location hidden from Cobra central, so hopefully they had the benefit of surprise going here. He pressed the radio to his lips and pressed the talk button.

“Hold it…hold it,” he said calmly, waiting for the maximum number of tanks in the ‘kill zone’. Two more tanks appeared to bring the number to five, which was half of the group. Gung Ho decided that the time was now.

“NOW! Go! Go! Go!” He shouted into the radio and the treaded vehicles happily complied.

The Mauler roared from behind the volcano with a thunderous growl, spitting up wet dirt and mud behind its massive tank treads. It slid sideways on the wet ground slightly, but then suddenly caught and jerked forward, spraying the air with wet, goopy ground. Almost immediately, it’s main cannon thundered across the open area, a huge orange bloom and belch of smoke exploding from the barrel. The first HISS slammed on the brakes, and the treads locked, sending it sliding at a slight angle over the wet ground. It spun slightly before the Mauler’s massive shell struck it broadside and blasted a hole in the thick, black armor. The shell strike was followed almost immediately by an explosion as the first HISS crumpled, then burst into flames, showering the other tanks with black armor shards and fiery debris. The two flanking HISS’s were forced to turn to avoid the deadly shrapnel, which halted them from returning fire. The Mauler continued its forward momentum and its automated reloading system slid another shell into place. Another shot pounded from the barrel and whistled smoothly through the air, striking a second HISS directly in the canopy section. This tank dipped forward, spun in the mud, then flipped clumsily to the ground, tossing the Viper from his turret, and sending him skidding. Another HISS, following too closely, rammed into this one and spun out also, forcing his turret to aim into the trees. The Viper in the turret quickly swiveled and his arms shook as the double barrels launched the first retaliatory strike of this little skirmish. A plume of mud sprayed into the air as the return shot slammed harmlessly into the ground next to the Mauler, which was altering course slightly. The remaining HISS’s had now all picked up speed and bore down on this small open area between the forest and the volcano, their guns blazing fire and raining artillery down on the lone tank. With a lurch, the tan tank whipped backwards, just as a shower of HISS shells poured down towards it, blowing chunks in the soft ground and blasting an intimidating row of craters just ahead of the massive armored vehicle. Just as the Mauler spun out backwards, the Wolverine whipped around it, slipping across the muck, but then digging in and charging forward. Immediately, a barrage of missiles hurtled from the twin square rocket launchers mounted on the smaller tank and crashed into the first row of HISS Tanks. Two missiles were wasted as they exploded against the two burning tanks, but the second three drilled another pair of HISS’s and left them burning. Fires now illuminated the night as almost half of the rushing horde of HISS Tanks were smashed and consumed by flame. More tanks charged forward, plowing straight through the flaming wreckage, knocking it aside or crushing it like it was cardboard and tissue paper instead of glass and cold, hard armor plate. The Wolverine whipped to the left as a barrage of return fire roared towards it. Cover Girl ducked her head in the open cockpit, then spun the tank back around and launched two more missiles. The HISS leading the charge was struck head on and reduced to scrap in a blast of orange/red and cloud of smoke. Suddenly, the low meaty growl of the HISS’s was covered up by the high pitched whine and squeal of smaller and quicker engines, becoming more audible as they drew closer. A black Stinger Jeep zipped around one side of the row of tanks, it’s large, four capacity missile launcher quickly emptying towards the tanks. The Mauler spun around quickly, and the missiles whipped by, smashing into the volcano in a large blast of yellow, throwing dark chunks of rock formation in all directions. With a deafening *BOOM* The Mauler launched a shell, but the Stinger was too agile and swerved quickly, unharmed. It skidded to a halt, and a gray suited Cobra trooper lunged out, assault rifle in hand, firing sporadically towards the open cockpit of the Wolverine. Cover Girl ducked yet again, wincing as 5.56-millimeter slugs pounded against the thick metal plating. Two more Stingers swerved around the tanks, but they were more conservative with their missiles, and only fired once each. The first whipped between the two tanks and hurtled out into the darkness, and the second struck the ground just in front of the Wolverine, blasting rock and wet mud up into the underside of the tank. The front of the vehicle jumped into the air with the force, but slammed back down with little harm done. Cover Girl squinted out into the pouring rain, her hair already matted to her smooth, unblemished face. She scowled, but pressed onwards, barely avoiding another shelling from the HISS’s. The Mauler moved in to cover her back, but stopped abruptly as a red missile pounded into the side of it, near the rear end. The tank lurched and slid with the shock of the hit, but managed to launch a shell in the right direction. The Stinger that fired the missile was annihilated with the tank shot, and left a black burning hulk. Two more Stingers appeared from behind the HISS Tanks, roared by quickly, and before the two Joe tanks could do anything, had spun around behind them, their missiles primed and ready. A cannon blast tore from the treeline and slammed into the back of one of the Stingers, striking the missile rack. The jeep shook and exploded, taking the Stinger next to it with him. With a triumphant shout, Clutch floored the AWE Striker into the fray, its twenty-millimeter cannon blasting away. He effortlessly wove through the burning jeeps, flame licking at the roll bar, and following in a little trail behind them as he sped into the battlefield. Outback stood on the rear of the buggy, one hand tightly gripping the roll bar, and the other hand wrapped around his assault rifle. The gray clad Stinger Driver repositioned himself and rattled off some shots at the Striker. Outback ducked away and hauled back on the trigger of his own weapon, tattooing the driver and dropping him in his tracks. With a spray of mud, the AWE Striker whipped to the right, its cannon roaring at the row of HISS’s. One shot struck the canopy of one of them, and slammed through it, leaving the tank without a driver. The large black tanks spun their turrets to get a bead on the Striker, but two of them were plastered by the Wolverine’s five remaining missiles and exploded into rippling fireballs. The Mauler spun its treads, hoping to move in on the tanks, but Bazooka soon found out that the missile shot had torn apart his left track, leaving him motionless. He swore under his breath, and fired from his current position, wiping out a HISS that was trying to take out the buggy. Tank shells whistled above Outback’s head as he ducked down and he winced as the Striker was showered by small chunks of rock and debris from the volcano, which was being pounded by the HISS tanks. Clutch hit the brakes and whipped the wheel to the left, spinning the buggy around. Rain continued to pelt the ground and everyone on it, as a shimmering gray curtain of rainfall covered the land. The tires didn’t grip well in the wet mud and the buggy slid, slamming sideways into the base of the volcano. Outback’s arm strained as he struggled to stay on the back of the vehicle. The rear tires finally gripped and launched the Striker forward, digging small, tire-sized trenches in the mushy ground behind them. The roof mounted cannon blasted to life and plowed into another HISS, but it hit the sloped armor and pretty much bounced off, only rocking the tank instead of destroying it. With a blast of smoke and flame, the HISS cannon roared itself and struck the front left wheel of the Striker. The buggy jerked and dipped forward, digging into the soft earth, and throwing its inhabitants roughly to the ground. Momentum continued to carry the small Joe vehicle forward and it flipped clumsily, bouncing from its roll bar, and rolling to a stop, stuck in a small ditch that its own force dug in the moist ground. The Vipers in the remaining turrets almost seemed to smile with their very body language as they turned the guns on the three Joes sprawled in the wet mud, rain thrashing their prone bodies. The roar of a Gatling gun broke the tension as the RAM Motorcycle zoomed into the midst of battle, its “sidecar” firing full bore, spitting out an endless shower of orange sparks. The gun fired with rapid, sequential thuds, however most of them merely bounced off of the thick tanks’ hides. One Viper snarled and spun the turret around, taking twisted satisfaction in the apparent overkill. Gung Ho jumped to his feet and lunged, pulling his M203 grenade launcher out from under his mud covered body as he did so. He pumped it quick and fired, then hit the ground as another shell from the HISS zipped over his head and reduced the Striker to shrapnel and smoky ruin. The grenade hit its mark exceptionally well and dropped into the turret of the Viper who was bearing down on Bullhorn, who was riding the motorcycle. The Cobra trooper looked confused, uncertain of exactly what had dropped in his lap. Before realization hit him, the grenade detonated in a muffled blast, tearing through the gunner and tossing his limp body onto the wet ground.

“Nice shot!” Clutch shouted as he charge forward next to his squad leader, firing his automatic pistol.

“Thanks,” Gung Ho said as he dropped again and reloaded the launcher. “But I was aiming for the canopy.”

“Still…”

“Of the other HISS.”

Clutch laughed as he fired jacketed lead at the last gunner to keep his head down. “I won’t tell, if you don’t tell about me crashing the Striker.”

“Deal!” An explosion shortened the conversation and sent the two men sprawling forward as a blast of mud erupted into the air from the last HISS’s shelling. Bullhorn directed the RAM over to his fallen buddies, and once again tried to draw the HISS’s fire. The HISS suddenly spun its launcher and brought it towards the men, but two streaks honed in at it at once. The first yellow streak was followed closely by a winding trail of smoke and hit the HISS in the side, rocking it back and blasting black shrapnel into the air. The second streak was more orange in color, although it, too was followed closely by a smoke trail and struck the large tank between the turret and the canopy blasting the front of it into burnt shards of armor plate. It lay still and smoldering.

“Nice shooting hombre!” shouted Zap who lay crouched by the treeline.

“You too, amigo!” Bazooka called back from the front of the Mauler where he stood, his portable rocket launcher in hand. The night was once again drenched in silence, with only the roaring flames of burnt out vehicles supplying the ambience. The Joes converged together, and Zap ran up to Gung Ho.

“I know you said to stay under cover, but I thought that was a suitable reason for disobeying orders.”

“Good decision, Zap,” Gung Ho said happily, clapping his buddy on the shoulder. Cover Girl pulled herself out of the Wolverine and joined her comrades.

“Don’t know how much help I’ll be now. My racks are dry,” she said nodding towards the tank.

“Hawk should be bringing some crates of ammo when he gets here. We’ll have to hold this spot for now.”

“With an immobile tank and no missiles?” Bazooka asked. “How—?” his sentence was interrupted by a low roar and whistle coming from behind the burning tanks.

“Incoming!” shouted Gung Ho and they all hit the ground as the red streak flew over them and disappeared into the dark. A Stinger suddenly struck the burning hulks and launched into the air, just over the flames, and landed with a splatter in the wed mud and pouring rain. Two Vipers clutched the bar on the back as the jeep hurtled towards the Joes and let off another rocket. This one sped into the treeline and exploded harmlessly, but the jeep bore down closer. The Joes stood stock still as the jeep plowed through the thick mud, its yellow headlights bearing down on them. A loud, long growl erupted from behind the Mauler and red tracer fire lit the sky, tearing into the black jeep. The two Vipers grunted and were thrown off as the Stinger lurched one way, then turned again too quick and rolled, bouncing end over end, until it finally came to a rest, smoke drifting slowly from its underside and hood. Repeater exited from behind the Mauler.

“Come on, Joes!” he shouted. “Don’t count the chickens before they hatch…Hit & Run said *five* Stingers, remember?”

Gung Ho frowned. “Sorry, troops…guess it’s been too long since we’ve all been in the field.” His grim face did not stay grim for long. “But believe me, Joes, that is the last mistake we’re making tonight! We *are* taking Cobra Island tonight, even if we’re the only ones to do it! *Do you get me?*”

“*Sir, yes sir!”*

“Good.” Gung Ho motioned to Bullhorn, who came over. He grabbed the radio from his belt and pressed the talk button. “This is bald eagle to mountain lion. Come in, mountain lion.”

“This is mountain lion…go ahead.” It was Alpine’s voice.

“You boys are our eye in the sky. Tell me what you see.”

“We are on the volcano’s western face, pointing towards Cobra Command. We have some troop and HISS movement. It looks like they’re setting up a defensive perimeter around the citadel.”

“All right. Anything else coming our way?”

“Negative,” replied Hit & Run this time, “everything seems quiet. We have lots of troop and vehicle movement throughout the rest of the island, but our path is looking cle—what the--?”

“Hit & Run?” Gung Ho asked, his concern raising. There was no response. His eyes darted around nervously.

“What’s going on?” asked Lifeline, who was walking from the trees.

“Lifeline! Get back to cover *now!*” Gung Ho shouted just before the noise began. The Joe medic ran for the trees where he had left Spearhead just as fire began raining down along with the large drops of water. The Joes dashed in all directions as explosions began ripping apart the dirt path where they stood, blowing pieces of ground and clumps of earth in all directions. The formerly quiet night was now once again almost deafening with the large, loud reports of heavy artillery. Bazooka immediately ran for the Mauler.

“Everyone scatter! Bullhorn! What do you see?” he asked to the young man who had binoculars pressed to his face.

“ASP Emplacements, sir! On the face of the volcano!”

“What? Our radar would have picked that up!”

Explosions ripped apart the night and showered down upon them. An orange streak struck the Mauler and the roof caved slightly before the entire tank exploded in a brilliant yellow flash, swallowing Bazooka who was mere feet from it.

“I don’t think now is the time to argue semantics!” Bullhorn dove to his right as more yellow streaks dove down, plastering the wet ground. The rain now picked up as well, almost as if accepting the challenge from the gunners on the cliff face. It had been silent, but now…it was as if the very gates of hell were open and the world was being swallowed by fire.

 Deep under the earth, the smooth concrete walls of the tunnel had given way to a disturbing dark red brick that made up the walls of the cell. The eight Joes were left cuffed and standing in the large room. It was square…cubical, really, and the walls were dark red brick, although the red was not uniform. It appeared in streaks and swaths, which told the unwilling inhabitants that it was most likely not paint that created the disturbing color. A trio of cots spread along the back wall, with no blankets or mattresses for that matter. Ripcord sat on one of these cots, clutching his stomach and rubbing his purple, puffy face. Stalker knelt down and checked him out to make sure nothing was broken, and nothing appeared to be, but it sure did look messy.

“Sorry guys,” Ripcord said through clenched teeth. “I screwed up…”

“Stow it, troop,” Duke said, a slight grin on his face. “I kinda liked the way you beat Zartan’s feet with your face. Took guts, kid.”

Ripcord chuckled, but winced, obviously going with the cliché that it only hurt when he laughed. Each man was still cuffed, some behind their backs, but most in front. There was no furniture, no tables, nothing which could possibly be taken and used to their advantage. Claymore studied the room carefully, almost willing himself to find a way out. The only entrance or exit was a thick metal door with a small slit in it…not even bars, only a thin slot to look out of. He walked slowly over to do just that, but before he could reach the door, it swung quickly open. Claymore stepped back, but not enough to admit any kind of fear of his captor. Two men entered. One clad in the familiar garb of a Cobra Trooper. He wore the deep blue uniform with black web gear, had black boots, gloves and a cloth mask wrapped tightly over the lower half of his face. A matching blue helmet was pulled tight above his stern face, and he glared at the Joes with unhindered, complete animosity. The glare was not dissimilar to the vicious toothy grin of the Cobra emblazoned on his chest. A shotgun was slung over his shoulder, and his black-gloved hand rested casually on it, although was tensed and could obviously react at a moment’s notice. Following the young trooper was another, taller, broader man. His uniform was that of an Interrogator, Cobra’s little known, but much feared interrogation expert and torturer. The uniform was mostly gray, with some blue highlights, and covered with many different disturbing instruments and tools of unpleasantness. This Interrogator, however, did not wear the usual helmet associated with the legions of faceless torture experts and wicked prison guards. He displayed his visage proudly, even with the jagged scar over his left eye, which was covered by a black patch. Covering his head was a captain’s hat, gray with a dark front brim. The symbol on the front was not one that any of the Joes recognized.

“Greetings, gentlemen,” the man said calmly, in a thick Russian accent. The Cobra Trooper slid the door shut behind them and locked it. “My name is Gulag. I understand you are my guests for the night, yes?”

No one spoke or moved, they all merely stared at the two men who had just entered. Gulag glanced around, taking in the crowd of prisoners. They looked tough and hard…just the way the former Russian prison commandant liked them. They were the ones that lasted the longest, and supplied the most enjoyment.

“Your names please?” he asked, almost too kindly. He first looked at Duke, who did not speak. His eyes moved all around the room, soaking in every last bit of information from these men. “Ah yes, you are silent now. But before the night is over, you will be begging me to let you speak. *Begging!* Do you understand me?” He sighed restlessly and turned, then was gone, followed shortly by his Cobra companion who slammed the door behind them. The lock closed with a click. A solid and very final sound.

“Who the heck is he supposed to be?” Stalker asked angrily.

“Colonel Klink,” said Beachhead, chuckling softly.

Claymore immediately went to the door. “Okay, we’ve got to get out of here and now,” he said, pressing his face against the door and squinting through the eye slit.

“Easy, Claymore,” Duke said, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder. Claymore flinched.

“Look, Duke…I know what you’re thinking,” he said, turning away from the door. “Play it cool and wait until we have the advantage.”

“Exactly.”

A stream of sweat ran slickly down Claymore’s face. “I don’t know if that’s going to work, Top,” he said calmly, but with the slightest twinge of panic.

“We’re all professionals, pal,” Recondo piped in, walking over to the older man, who still stood rigid by the door.

“Yeah, but you weren’t all in the ‘Hanoi Hilton” for two years, bucko,” he said sternly.

Duke stepped towards the Joe operative and extended his hand. “P.O.W.?” he asked quietly.

Claymore nodded. “Out in the jungles, I’m like magic, Top…but locked up…trapped…I don’t do so hot.”

“Understandable. Take a seat on one of the cots, buddy. We’re getting out of this, don’t worry.” Duke motioned to the middle cot next to where Ripcord sat. Claymore obliged and strode to the wooden slab and sat down. Falcon walked over to the other Joes to get in on the gossip.

“Plans, Top?” he asked Duke simply.

“Nope. We need some intel, man…see what we’re dealing with.”

“Our little escort party’s out in the hallway,” Claymore said from the cot where he sat. “They’re standing guard…a rocket launcher, flame thrower…some grenades and a couple whackos with machine guns.” He laid his head down and actually started to relax slightly. “Whatever we do, we have to be quick about it, or it’s going to be over before it begins.”

“I hear you,” Duke replied. He glanced at his watch. “Dang. Our timetable is flushed. We have fifteen until the deadline for radar cancellation. Time to improvise.”

“That’s what we do best,” Beachhead piped in.

Muskrat smirked. “So, what’s the plan, fearless leader?” he asked, adjusting his boonie hat with his cuffed hands.

“Take a load off. Sit and wait is about all we can do, Joes.” The plan didn’t go over well, but in all actuality it was their only option, and they all knew it.

Cobra Commander sat back in his large throne at the center of the command area and cast his eyes at the numerous monitors on the wall in front of him. Scrap Iron’s boots clanked along the metal floor as he approached from behind, causing the Crimson Guard Immortals to tense just slightly. A female Viper was with him, clad in a more form fitting uniform, and instead of the blue and silver helmet, wore a gray facemask.

“You called, Commander?” the explosives expert asked as he approached the throne. The Commander turned and smiled when he saw them.

“I certainly did, Scrap Iron. And who is this?” he asked, bending down slightly to get a better look at the slim female.

“This is Viper Conda, sir. She is my best driver. The one you asked for.”

“Conda, hmm?” Cobra Commander asked.

“Yes, sir,” she replied. “Ann A. Conda,” she said with a smile. “I had my name changed so it would be more…appropriate.”

Cobra Commander laughed like a rabid hyena, throwing his head back and cackling. “Excellent, my dear, excellent! You will fit in well here.”

“Thank you, sire.”

“Scrap Iron, I want you two to lead a team of Stingers. She will be the driver, and you the missile operator. I have formed a line of defense along the eastern side of the cluster, and you shall be the strike force.” He leaned further down, and talked more softly. “Destro will hold them off, my dear, and you two will wipe them out.”

The young lady smiled. “Happily, sire.”

“Good…Viper Conda, though…that’s kind of a mouthful. How about simply…Vypra?” The Commander tilted his head and the woman smiled broadly.

“With pride, my lord! I will not fail you!”

“See that you don’t.”

“As you wish, Commander,” Scrap Iron piped in, and left with his protege, back towards the motor pool. Just as they vanished from sight, Zartan appeared from the main hallway, walking sternly, his cowl washing down over his broad shoulders.

“Cobra Commander,” Zartan said simply, as he approached.

The Commander stepped down and joined his confidant. “Zartan…I understand we have some guests I should thank you for.”

“My pleasure, Commander.” The both walked to the entrance to the command center, the Immortals hot on their heels.

“What is being done about them?” he asked.

“I sent in Gulag to have a word with them.”

“Good…good. Make sure our Interrogator gets all of the necessary information, all right? I want their files supplied, everything. You may want to debrief him on the…questions I would like him to ask.”

“Very well. The interrogation may take a little while. Gulag likes to let them stir—“

“Absolutely not, Zartan! We are under attack as we speak!” The Commander halted and spoke with energy, talking with his hands as well as his mouth. “I need this information, and I need it now!”

“Understood.” Zartan spun on his heels.

“Oh, and Zartan?”

“Yes?” he asked, not turning.

“After this…I’m going to need you…we are formulating a counter attack and I want you to be a part of my security team.”

“As you command,” He said simply and continued down the hallway. Cobra Commander sighed and turned, finding his vision blocked by the sudden appearance of Overlord.

“Good heavens!” Cobra Commander shouted. “What the devil are *you* doing here?”

“I was under the impression that you needed every spare man you could get, Commander.”

“Well, yes, true.” The Commander smiled broadly. “How about a HISS patrol, Overlord? Ever ridden shotgun on a High Speed Sentry?”

“Err…no, Commander…I was thinking more of an inside job…at one of the terminals, maybe?”

“Very well,” the Commander said roughly. He gestured off towards the computer banks that saturated the walls. “Go…make yourself useful!” Overlord wandered off and Cobra Commander strode confidently to his throne.

“Aahhh…I just love it when a plan comes together.”

Not much time had passed before the scarred and patch-wearing Interrogator stormed back inside. His previous calm demeanor had been completely replaced by an acidic scowl and vicious scorn. The two men entered again, and the thick metal door shut with a huge bang, reverberating against the walls of the small, confining cell.

“Well, gentlemen,” he spat. “I have returned.” He looked more than slightly annoyed, and also looked ready to take it out on everybody present. “Apparently our little time table has been…altered, shall we say? So, I have to speed things up a little bit.” He cracked his knuckles slowly and methodically, and worked some cricks in his neck. “I apologize for the…brutality I may have to exhibit, but time is of the essence,” he said it with a thin smirk that told all in the room that he was not one bit sorry for anything he had done, or would do in the next few hours. The Trooper smirked right along with him, almost caressing his smooth, metal shotgun.

Duke almost laughed out loud. The Interrogator’s right eye squinted and his lips curled.

“You find something funny, comrade?” he asked, slowly flexing his fingers. “Please, share with me, the source of your amusement.”

Duke stood stock-still and did not move, speak or flinch. Gulag stepped closer.

“I see…” he turned around and drew in a breath, then whipped around suddenly, a thin baton in his hand. The metal wand whacked Duke in the side of his face, and he dropped like a stone, not expecting the crushing blow.

“Not so funny now, is it?” Gulag demanded. The Joes rushed to Duke’s aid and helped him to his feet. “Now that that…unpleasantness is behind us…we can get on to the question and answer session, yes?”

No one spoke.

“Well, this will prove interesting.” Gulag tossed his baton to the floor where it rattled to a stop next to the wall. “You there,” he said, pointing to Duke again. Duke scowled, a red mark already fading into view on his chiseled cheekbone.

“Sergeant, yes?”

“Yeah,” Duke finally responded.

“Duke…leader of this little band of rabble.”

“Big deal. You know my name. I don’t know you from Adam, so give me one reason why I should say squat to you.”

Gulag paced calmly back and forth on the concrete floor. He halted, cocked his head as if to think, looked directly at the First Sergeant. “Believe me, big man,” Gulag said, once again stepping closer to the sergeant, then lowered his voice to a dim, rough whisper. “By the time we’re done, we will know each other very, very well.” He stepped back and raised his voice again.

“How many in your force?” he asked, slipping his hand into his right hand pocket.

“Can’t count? We’re all right here, boss,” Duke snarled.

Gulag sighed. “You will be making this difficult.” His face twisted into a distasteful, angry snarl. “Well, you are not the only one who can make this difficult, my friend.”

“I am not your friend.”

“Hmmm,” Gulag said, smirking, “I wonder how long your defiance will last? Once I get down to business, not too long, I’d wager.” The Interrogator crossed his arms over his broad leather covered chest and smirked again. With a sigh, the hands went back in the pockets and he shook his head sadly.

“Why don’t you try me?” Duke stepped up this time, coming face to face with his captor. Gulag laughed and walked away, but then stopped and turned.

“How many in your force, Sergeant?” He pulled his hand out of his pocket and flexed his fingers underneath the shiny brass knuckles that curved over the contours of his fist.

“Do anything you want, Patch. Only words you’re getting out of me is kiss my—“

The fist struck him with the force of a sledgehammer, crashing into the side of his face. He spun clumsily, spraying blood in a sharp arc all over the walls, which were already a dark crimson hue. Duke stumbled, but refused to fall, slamming with all of his weight on one shoulder into the brick. His knees buckled slightly, but he managed to remain standing.

“You were saying, Sergeant?” Gulag stomped towards the Joe, stopping mere inches from his face. His breath was hot and sour against Duke’s skin. “Now, Swine! Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

“Y..yeah,” Duke gurgled, pulling himself upright. “I…I’ve had kisses from Grandma that hurt more than that.” He smirked wickedly seeing the fierce hatred in the other man’s eyes. Gulag cocked his arm back, baring his shiny white teeth. Duke anticipated and backpedaled, but not quickly enough and the back fist caught him with shattering impact across the bridge of his nose. He went stumbling backwards, his arms flailing inside the cuffs, but caught his balance with his compatriots helping him remain standing.

Gulag snarled, his teeth bared again. He clutched Duke away with his empty hand and threw him to the floor. The Trooper stepped between the other Joes and Gulag, showing the shotgun for emphasis. The Interrogator kneeled down next to the fallen sergeant and cocked his arm back.

“Tell me!”

“H…Hauser…Conrad, S., First Sergeant. 234-0955-GI89.”

“Name rank and serial number? Surely you can be more witty than that!” Gulag plowed his fist directly into the Joe’s face, whipping his head back. His eyes squinted shut as the brass knuckles slammed into his already bruised and puffing face.

“How many, Sergeant?” Gulag asked again, this time standing, and pulling Duke to his feet. The field commander of the GI Joe team was wobbly on his feet, his tan shirt already soaking red with the blood from his split face. His jaw felt loose and disconnected, and his head swam.

“Hauser…C…Conrad S., First--” this time the knuckles drove deep into his ribs and he dropped to his knees again, coughing horrifically. He held himself up with his cuffed hands as he hacked and choked, pain tearing through his lungs with each breath. A red haze clouded his very thoughts, the only thing clear, was the pain, agony and desperation. Liquid ran in rivers and floods from the torn and broken flesh of his beaten body. Gulag glared down at him with utter contempt.

“Hmm…I see we need a different approach, hm?” he asked. He shoved the sergeant with a stiff boot, and rolled him over onto his side. Duke lay still and didn’t move, although his breath still heaved in ragged gasps. A steady stream of blood ran from his pressed lips and now collected on the concrete floor.

“Trooper!” Gulag shouted.

“Yes, sir?” the Trooper asked, eager to be of help.

The Interrogator cast his gaze around the room, as if to decide who to be his next victim. Each man presented their own scowl…their own look of hatred and defiance. Gulag enjoyed it thoroughly. “Take that one,” Gulag replied, pointing to Ripcord who half sat and half lay on the left hand cot.

“No!” shouted Stalker, stepping in the way. The Trooper shoved him with the shotgun and scowled.

“Just tell me what I want to know, and this will all be over,” Gulag said with a smirk of satisfaction. Stalker did not reply.

The Trooper gripped tightly to Ripcord’s arm and yanked him from the cot, and then half dragged him to a standing position next to Gulag. Duke’s eyes fluttered.

“Sergeant?” Gulag asked, smiling. He gestured to Ripcord. The Trooper raised the shotgun until it was mere inches from the young Joe’s chest, hovering there like a long, black finger of death pointing to its next victim. Duke’s eyes were slits as he stared at the Interrogator who stood before him, almost glowing with victory.

“Tell me! *HOW MANY IN YOUR FORCE?*” He glared back down at the fallen sergeant, whose eyes wandered and met Ripcord’s. They looked at each other like friends that could only be made during combat. War buddies…men who had saved each other’s lives countless times, and were quite possibly only alive today because of each other. It was a deep friendship that only is made between soldiers. There was also just the slightest hint of loss…and a solid glare of understanding.

“D…Don’t tell them anything, Duke,” Ripcord stammered. The Trooper shoved him roughly, and then lifted the shotgun again.

Duke looked at his young teammate. Remembered his first mission with the team. His onetime innocence now erased by over a decade of warfare. It amazed Duke that he still thought of Ripcord as a kid. He was an older, experienced soldier now. A great trooper, and a great friend. Duke blinked through foggy vision, looking straight at his teammate and cleared his throat to speak.

“How many, Sergeant Hauser?” Gulag asked more calmly, and with confidence as he awaited the answer to his question.

“Hauser, Conrad S.,” Duke said with stiff determination, his eyes locked on Ripcord’s, and as much as he tried to fight it they were tearing, just slightly. “First Sergeant, 245-0955-GI89,”

The shotgun roar shook the room with the thunder of its blast.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

**Eye of the Storm**

It was the sound of pure madness. An opened window into the mind of insanity…a noise, both guttural and shrieking. At one point a low growl, escalating to a shrill fever pitch, then choppy chortles and thick snorting. It could barely be classified as laughter, but was laughter for sure, although laughter that none of the Joes had heard before or would hope to hear again. The smoke from the shotgun blast still hung thick in the air, mingling with it, as if the two were the most intimate of confidants. Intertwined and rolling through each other; one damp and musty, and the other a metallic, putrid stink. Somehow they blended together into an entirely new kind of sensation. Not smell, per se, but an assault on the senses just the same. The echo of the blast still rang in everyone’s unbelieving ears. Such a vicious attack, even for those familiar with wartime violence, was definitely a shock to behold, especially at such close range, and with such unexpected ferocity. The only sounds besides the fading echoes and the choking laughs was the light tinkle of metal on concrete as the spent shell casing rolled in a strange arc on the hard prison cell floor. Thin wisps of steam and smoke spiraled from the small brass cylinder and mixed with the fog that hung in the air itself, joining together into one swirling, gray, noxious cloud.

“Ha! Brilliant!” Gulag shouted, throwing his head back and continuing his laughter. He could barely speak with the force of his guffaws, and tears streamed down his twisted and scarred face. “Completely unexpected…such viciousness…I wasn’t sure you had it in you!” he laughed again with body rocking brutality, sending him stumbling, but not too far, as his back was already pressed up against the crimson brick wall. His good eye scanned his surroundings, soaking in all the surrounding pain and misery. It delighted his senses, made him almost giddy with joy. Tears continued to stream over his round cheeks, now red with the attack of laughter he was now suffering through. It was a strange cackling now…a hyena like shriek, and then faded down to the guttural growl again. Duke’s eyes stayed pressed shut as he hung his head low, trying to avoid the brutal scene before him. He had felt the light, wet spattering over him as the shotgun blast ripped through human flesh and was unable to force himself to look up…possibly see one of his men in the last seconds of his life. His heart slammed in his chest just under the blood and sweat soaked tan shirt he wore. His bare arms were tensed and flexing over the concrete floor and he finally dared to pry his eyes open, and drew in a breath when he saw the amount of blood on the floor. It was messy. Gulag’s laughter suddenly grew in pitch again and in between chuckles, his ragged breathing rocked his chest.

“L…laughing so hard,” he muttered, gasping. “Ch…chest hurts…so…funny. Who would have seen it…” his face contorted from pure laughing joy into a spacey gaze of confusion. His gloved fingers clutched at the brick wall as his breath continued to choke in his lungs. He coughed and sputtered, red foam bubbling to his lips as his right eye rolled back into his head. Knees buckling, he slid slowly down the wall, his breath slowing to a gurgle. A series of red streaks smeared over the brick behind him, following the Interrogator down to the concrete floor where he slumped over and laid to rest. Duke lifted his head at the curious sounds, and saw exactly what his ears had been telling him. Ripcord stood there unmoving, his hand placed reflexively to his camouflaged chest. Other than the battered and bruised face he had suffered already, he was, by all appearances unharmed. Duke glanced over to his left as he struggled to pull himself from the floor and saw Gulag laying there in a heap, his head bowed, and the blue/gray uniform torn apart and plastered with crimson and a much darker, thicker liquid, which slowly rolled down his torso. Duke finally brought himself to his feet, his mouth twisted underneath the red that was now caking to the skin on his face. Ripcord and he glared at each other in confusion, then turned their attention to the Cobra Trooper who stood there with the shotgun, which still oozed thick gray smoke from the round barrel. The Trooper jacked the pump back quickly, driving another round into the chamber. He looked at the Joes curiously, his eyes probing, searching the group, looking for what, Duke was not sure. They all stood there in stunned silence, not sure what to make of the entire event that had just unfolded in front of their eyes. Duke walked slowly over to him and looked him in the eyes.

“Look, pal…I don’t know who you are, or why you did what you did, but thanks.”

“Save the thanks, Duke,” the voice said behind the mask. His eyes narrowed slightly, but stayed friendly. “I’m only here for one reason. To get me some payback.”

Duke cocked his head slightly, and the Cobra Trooper slid off his helmet, then cast it into the far corner of the cell where it struck with a metallic twang, then dropped to the floor. He let the shotgun swing loose on the leather shoulder strap that it hung from, which freed his hands to reach back and untie the black bandana wrapped tightly around the lower half of his face. It dropped and Duke grinned widely, in spite of himself. The crooked smile…the boyish good looks, which still remained after all these years. A glisten in the eye that Duke had not seen for very long…too long. His dark hair was tussled and matted from being under the helmet, but did nothing to betray who it was. Duke strolled smoothly up to him and clasped his hand tightly with both of his own, his smile widening.

 “C’mon, boys,” the ‘Cobra Trooper’ said with that lopsided grin, looking towards the other Joes. “We’re going home.”

 “Flint!” Duke said, almost overjoyed. The pleasure was visible even through the puffy and swollen, blood caked face.

“Duke,” Flint said simply, clapping his buddy firmly on the shoulder. The other Joes had to stifle the urge to cheer out loud at the sight of their old buddy and former teammate. Flint would have blushed had he been a less cocky man…but he loved the attention, and had missed the action for the past number of years. The smell of gun smoke and the feeling of a weapon rocking in his tight grasp were like seeing an old friend again.

“How the hell did you get here?” Stalker asked, slapping Flint on the back.

“Well, after Duke tried to recruit me, I figured Cobra was up to no good again.” Flint grabbed a hold of the black mask and pulled it back up around his face again. “You’d be surprised how easy it is for one man to get on this island. They don’t think one man is much of a threat. Anyway, I took out a Cobra Trooper and took his uniform. When I heard there were Joe captives, I volunteered for the messy duty of ‘taking care of them’. Easy as that.”

“Glad to have you aboard, Flint,” Falcon said seriously, shaking his hand.

“Don’t get too misty eyed on me, boys.” His eyes narrowed over the mask and he adjusted the shotgun that hung by his side. “Like I said, I’m here for one thing only.”

“Destro?” Duke asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

“Right the first time, boss.” Flint swung the shotgun around and clutched it with both hands, his face turning deadly serious.

“There’s no place for personal vendettas on my team, soldier,” Duke said sternly.

Flint scowled. “Guess I’m on my own, then,” he said, spinning and walking towards the door. Duke grasped his shoulder with a tight, iron grasp.

“But…” he said as Flint turned slightly. “I think this time I can make an exception.” He smirked and Flint returned the slight smile.

“All right, now that everyone has kissed and made up,” Claymore interrupted, walking past them and glaring out the slot in the door. “There are still six different Vipers out here. Any ideas what to do about that?”

Flint pushed him aside slightly and pressed his own face against the door. The HEAT Viper and Incinerator stood just across from the door, leaning against the smooth concrete wall, chatting inaudibly to each other. Flint strained his neck and further down the hall the other four were gathered, two Frag Vipers and two Vipers, all standing guard with automatics at the ready.

“Well, the dangerous ones are right out here,” he said, gesturing. “I can take them out in seconds.”

“Will this help?” Beachhead asked, kneeling down by the fallen Interrogator. He produced a nine-millimeter Beretta from a holster strapped to his thigh. He moved slightly and the pistol flew through the air, and Duke snatched it effortlessly.

“You draw their fire, and I’ll take out the other four,” he said, cocking the pistol and checking the clip for ammo.

“Easy for you to say, Sarge,” Flint joked.

“So, you just going to prance on out there and brazen this whole thing right out?” Claymore asked, shaking his head slightly.

“This guy doesn’t know me too well, huh, Duke?” Flint said, smirking his familiar smirk. He patted Claymore on the shoulder. “My man, ‘brazen’ is my middle name.” He winked and strolled to the door, adjusting the shotgun yet again. He unlocked the thick metal door and swung it open slightly, then tossed it closed. Duke caught it on the way back and held it shut, so that it appeared locked.

“Hey, guys?” The ‘Trooper’ asked, strolling calmly across the hall. “You got a squeegee or something? Gulag made a nasty mess in there,” he jerked his head back to indicate.

“Piss off, little man,” the HEAT Viper grumbled. “Go find a Mop-Viper or something.” He and the Incinerator chuckled to each other as Flint continued his walk forward.

“That’s all right. There’s going to be a bigger mess anyway.” The shotgun rose up almost of its own accord, taking both men completely by surprise. The first shot exploded in the small confines of the hallway, plowing into the HEAT Viper at point blank range. Sparks flew from metal on metal body armor contact, but the cloth part of his uniform was shredded by the gunshot. He flew back under a flurry of sparks and crimson, striking the wall with a sickening thud, and then falling to the ground. Flint had the weapon pumped before he even hit the wall, then swiveled and ripped another shot off, this time directly into the Incinerator’s red tinged face-plate. Glass shattered and flesh tore as the flame-thrower dropped to the floor. Everything suddenly switched to slow motion as it often did in the middle of intense close quarter combat. The Joe in disguise spun and dropped as the four Vipers opened up with their machine guns down the hall. In this heightened sense of awareness, Flint could almost see the bullets whipping through the air and tearing into the concrete walls, sending orange sparks dancing and throwing tiny chunks of concrete throughout the hallway. Flint dropped to one knee as he yanked the pump on the shotgun, bullets streaming just over his head. The prison door whipped open, with Duke just behind it, the nine-millimeter clutched firmly in his right hand. The First Sergeant squinted through his swollen face, raised his arm and hauled back on the trigger. The pistol whipped back with every shot, but Duke’s grasp kept it level and aimed at the small group of Cobras. A Frag Viper appeared in the center of the triangular sight picture and Duke pounded a pair of shots into the center of his mass, tossing him back as if his muscles were loose elastic. Flint leaped to his left as a barrage of gunfire ripped clumps of concrete floor from their foundation and whipped them up into the air. One of the Vipers broke off from the group and dashed to his left, his arm extending towards a small silver box attached to the wall. Flint’s eyes narrowed and he saw the keypad quite clearly from where he stood.

“Sorry, Chum…this is a private party. No friends allowed!” Remaining on one knee, he lifted the shotgun into a more comfortable firing position and squeezed off another shot, the thin cylindrical weapon blasting back in his grasp. A large cloud of smoke rolled from the barrel of the weapon and the Viper stumbled as he ran, then fell to the ground and rolled to an awkward stop against the wall. Duke pulled himself quickly back around the thick door and winced as slugs slammed against it with dull metal clangs. He could feel the impacts against his back as the bullets bore down on the thick prison door. He lowered himself to one knee and suddenly rolled out from behind the door, pistol firmly clenched between two tight fists. With skillful grace, he rolled up onto a single knee and leveled the Beretta. It took the two Cobras a short while to adjust to his new location, which was all the time Duke needed. With a succession of well-aimed trigger pulls, the nine-millimeter was swiftly emptied into the two snakes, and they dropped, letting their weapons clatter to the cement floor. The Sergeant’s hands throbbed slightly after the rapid kickback it had suffered from the powerful handgun, but the hallway was clear and at least for the moment, they were free men.

“Clear!” He shouted.

“Clear!” Flint repeated. The six remaining Joe slowly exited the cell, walking carefully, but looking oddly naked with no firearms.

“We have to find our gear!” Claymore shouted, his eyes darting around. Duke finally realized that as good as Claymore was, inside an urban area, he was slightly out of his element. The jungle was his home.

“Works for me…sooner I get out of this snake skin the better,” Flint muttered, casting a disgusted look down at the uniform he wore. The hallway they were in was long and wide for about a hundred yards, then narrowed to a normal looking corridor. There were two more cell doors on the left hand wall before the room became slender again. “The storage lockers are down this hall. I stashed my own gear there, and I’m pretty sure that’s where they took your stuff, too,” Flint said, and pointed towards the narrow corridor.

Duke halted him for a second. “Hey, is this the only detention cell?” Duke asked, looking around.

“Couldn’t tell you,” Flint said. “Didn’t get much chance to check out the whole place. I’ve only been here about twelve hours or so.”

“We’re missing some boys,” Duke said, gesturing towards the cells. “I don’t plan on going anywhere until we make sure they’re not here.”

Flint nodded understandably and tossed Duke a key ring that hung from his belt. “Came with the suit,” he said, half joking. The First Sergeant caught it out of midair and jogged to the next cell. Flint went on slightly ahead, covering them with his shotgun. Duke squinted into the slot on the door and his heart skipped when he saw the body inside. It was curled up and shirtless, looking thin, but not unhealthy. Medical tape was wound around his ribs several times and a large bandage was strapped to his right side. He wore the familiar black pants of the elite Navy SEALs, and Duke smiled. The legs stirred slightly, bare feet curling and uncurling. With a twist, the field commander unlocked the door and swung it open, followed closely by the rest of the team. Flint stayed outside, shotgun in hand.

“Soldier?” Duke asked, walking closer. The smell inside the cell was not pleasant, but he was not fazed. With a groan the prisoner rolled over, and his face lit up slightly.

“D…Duke?” he asked in a hoarse whisper. He sat up with a start. “What the hell--?”

“Wet Suit!” Duke shouted happily when he finally saw his boy’s face. He helped the SEAL Team Leader into a comfortable sitting position. “Glad to see you’re living and breathing, troop!”

Wet Suit’s head hung low. “I’m the only one, Top,” he said in a low whisper.

Duke’s brow furrowed. “What was that, son?” he asked.

Wet Suit lifted his head, the unmistakable look of loss written on his pale face. “Team One…all gone, Duke. All of them. Tracker, too.”

“Damn!” Duke shouted, standing and punching at the wall. His hopes had risen when he saw the lone prisoner. He had just assumed the other troopers were in the neighboring cell. He took a calming breath as Wet Suit continued.

“I d…don’t know what Cobra’s got going on this island, Top…g…ghosts…they move without sound. Invisible to detection. Freaky stuff, Duke. Not natural.”

“That’s all right, kid,” Duke said, kneeling back down beside the SEAL. He wasn’t sure why he called him ‘kid’…Wet Suit was a seasoned soldier and one of the elite badmen of the Navy SEALs. Still, all of his troopers were ‘kid’ to him. “It’s not your fault, Wet Suit, all right? Shake it off, man, we’re going to get you out of here.”

Wet Suit smiled and glanced up at the troops in front of him. They were all smiling and glad to see their old buddy.

“Long time no see, soldier,” Claymore said with a nod.

“You, too, Claymore.”

Duke stood and shook his head. “You know this guy, Wet Suit?” he jabbed a thumb in Claymore’s direction.

“Sure. We were on a Special Mission together awhile back. In Brazil…”

“Hold up, kid. Don’t know as that’s declassified yet.” Claymore said, pulling his finger over his lips.

Duke sighed. “All right guys, we have to start searching for supplies. Wet Suit needs a stretcher, and we have to get a good route out—“

“With all due respect, sir,” Wet Suit interrupted, standing.

“What?” Duke asked, turning around.

“I said, with all due respect, sir, I can walk just fine, I can sneak even better, and if one of you yahoos would stop gabbin’ and grab me a firearm I’d show you that I can still shoot, too.” His face was stern and dead serious, and Duke’s eyes grew wide over his red, puffy cheeks.

“Whatever you boys are doing here, I mean to help you do it. To hell with the stretcher.”

“Well, son,” Duke said with a grin. “If I was wondering about your mental or physical health before, I’m not wondering now. *That’s* the Wet Suit we all know and love.” Duke extended his hand and the Navy SEAL clasped it enthusiastically. “Beachhead will fill you in,” Duke continued, as the Army Ranger strode forward to greet one of the guys he joined up with. The First Sergeant led the troops from the cell and cocked his head as he saw Flint at the door to the next cell. His mouth was moving and he seemed to be engaged in conversation with the inhabitant. Duke signaled to the others to remain there and quickly strode to the next door.

“Duke,” Flint said as he approached. “I think this guy might be helpful.”

Duke peered into the slot and drew his head back suddenly. “Are you nuts? He’s a Cobra,”

“Please,” pleaded the prisoner inside in an almost meek voice. “At least hear me out.”

Duke looked in again at the young man in the blue camouflage fatigues. His shirt was torn, almost shredded, and his chest was streaked with jagged, red scars. His pants were blue and black camouflage and he was barefoot. He was not wearing a mask or helmet, but the red Cobra sigil was slightly visible on the torn and ripped shirt. Duke glanced around to make sure no one was approaching. “Spill it, snake, but make it quick.”

The man’s eyes were open wide and pleading. “P…please…you must help me! I joined Cobra with my brother and two of our friends.” He stopped and coughed, suppressing his emotions. “We joined the helicopter squadron…Rotor-Vipers…we never signed up for this!”

“I’ve heard enough,” Duke said, turning.

“No! They’re dead! My brother…our friends…all dead.”

Duke spun back around.

“Dave was my best friend from high school…Cobra Commander had him gunned down in cold blood. The mission had been successful…why?” he buried his head in his hands and shook for a moment.

“Hey, kid!” Duke shouted. “Pull yourself together…what do you want? We are running out of time.”

“My o…my own brother…they tortured him. He c…he couldn’t hold out. I’m the only one left.” He seemed to snap together and lifted his head. “Please! I know the layout like the back of my hand! I can help…I want to help.”

Duke shifted uncomfortably and glanced at his watch. Sweat ran down the side of his red face, which was now turning a slight purple twinge from the abuse. “Fine, kid. You want in, you’re in,” he said, motioning to Flint. The Joe moved in and swiftly unlocked the door, and the young Rotor-Viper practically ran out into the hall, his bare feet slapping at the concrete floor. Duke placed a calming hand on his chest. “There are conditions, kid,” he said sternly. The Cobra nodded his head.

“Anything!”

“You’re on point,” Duke said. “No matter what, you lead the way. That way if you lead us into an ambush, you take the first bullet. And if we suspect you of anything, we can shoot you in the back. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” the young Cobra said happily, his salty tears already drying on his young face.

Duke motioned to the other Joes and they all approached. He then turned to the Cobra helicopter pilot. “All right, pal. First stop, the storage lockers. You first.”

“You got it,” he said, and led them off down the hall towards their weapons, and towards the heart of the base.

There was no sound in the low valley, as the fires roared and raged in the wet, dark night. Gung Ho blinked rapidly and shook his head, but all he heard was a dim buzzing…a shrill humming rocking his brain and threatening to tear his ear drum from its home, deep inside his head. The rain continued to slam the ground, accompanied by the rocking thunder and streaks of white lightning. As powerful as the rain was, the fires still raged, reaching up to the heavens as if trying to smother the rain before it killed them. Deep craters were scattered along the wet, muddy surface, and a thick, smoldering cloud covered everything the eye could see. Fortunately, the flames had illuminated the night, so everything was not plunged in darkness, but that was of little comfort, because all Gung Ho could see was smashed GI Joe vehicles and members of his team strewn along the trail. The Mauler worried him the most. It was burning, charred wreckage, unrecognizable as a tank, only a hunk of scrap metal. Bazooka had been right next to it when it had been struck, and Gung Ho had seen no movement since. He wasn’t even sure how long it had been. Seconds, minutes…hours? He could honestly not tell. At least Cover Girl had made it out with the Wolverine. He was certain she’d escaped the fire zone, but had no clue where she was now. Besides, the missile racks were empty, what could she possibly do? The Marine remained on his stomach, not wanting to move. Outback lay sprawled in the wet mud, his limbs bent at awkward angles, and a crater mere feet from his body. Clutch leaned against a tree, several feet away, sheltered from the artillery that had rained from above, but was currently not moving. Gung Ho twisted his neck over to the right and saw Bullhorn lying there, apparently unharmed. He didn’t move or speak, but the Marine had not seen him hit. Fiery debris lay strewn all over, even yards away from the site of the shelling, and Gung Ho was quite concerned, because none of his other troops were visible or making any noise. The Wolverine was gone, the Mauler smashed, and the AWE Striker was reduced to a smoldering pile. His hearing was clearing slightly, the flames crackling and roaring, sparking and chattering with the contact from the falling rain. The mixture of rain and flames thickened the smoke even more, flooding the valley between the volcano and the trees with a thick, choking smog.

“Bullhorn?” he half shouted at the still figure that lay not too far away. He stirred slightly and turned his head.

“Gung Ho?” he replied, shuffling on his stomach slightly.

“Yeah, buddy…hold, up, I’ll be right over. I think it’s clear.” He jumped to his feet and walked over to Bullhorn, who picked himself up off the ground as well. There was a crash of thunder, so loud it almost shook the ground. Gung Ho would have merely dismissed it with the crazy weather, but the shrill whistle in the air alerted him.

“Down, Bullhorn, down!” they both threw themselves to the ground just as a yellow blur whipped overhead and struck the treeline with a cloud of smoke and earth shattering blast. Charred timber and flaming wood leaped into the air and flopped down onto the wet earth, smoldering from the impact. Another crushing blow followed, this one to their left, then another one yards away from Gung Ho. The night echoed with the explosions, but then faded again into silence.

“Are we just going to sit here?” Bullhorn asked, obviously annoyed.

“No way. We’ve got buddies in rough shape out there. My priorities are with them.”

“Understood.” Bullhorn shuffled on his stomach closer to the squad leader, and they were now only a few feet apart. “Where are Zap and Airtight? Or Repeater? Are all of them okay?”

“I don’t know, Bullhorn. What I do know, is that we need cover and we need it now.” He made a sideways gesture with his bald head, towards the rows of smashed HISS Tanks. “I say we break for them. Once we get shelter behind there, we should be all right. It should at least give us a better vantage point. Besides, their ammo can’t last forever, right?”

Bullhorn shrugged. “I hope not. I counted six of them before we dove for cover. Maybe Hit & Run and Alpine—“

“We can’t count on them. We’ve got to play this like we’re the only ones left.”

“Yes, sir.”

“No time like the present, son. Up and at ‘em!” he shouted and jumped to his feet, then was off like a shot. Bullhorn was not far behind. The volley started immediately, pounding the ground where they lay, and drilling deep craters in the soft ground. With deep, thunderous blasts, the very earth shook under their feet as they ran. The HISSes seemed so far away, but they were drawing closer…closer...The shot hit within ten feet of the two men and rocked the earth like a small asteroid. Gung Ho found himself suddenly airborne, with Bullhorn flailing next to him, with complete and utter loss of control over their entire bodies. Smoke followed them up into the air, and they found themselves hurtling to the ground amidst clumps of smoldering earth and flaming rocks. The impact was not deadly, but Gung Ho’s breath burst in his lungs, and his back seared with pain. Bullhorn landed on his left shoulder and simply crumpled into a boneless pile of gel. The Marine looked up into the dark, stormy sky and saw his attackers for the first time. Bullhorn was right, there were six of them, embedded in the very volcano. The blue steel gun pods were angled up at almost ninety degrees and the twin barrels oozed smoke into the already rainy, smoky air. All six of them swiveled on their bases, and Gung Ho could almost feel the targeting sights on his chest. Where they had been lying before, there was little light and lots of ground clutter. The ASPs had been unable to pick them out until they moved. Now they lay right out in the open, near the collection of flaming tanks, and the ASPs no longer had to wait for movement. It was a free fire zone, and Gung Ho had a monster bull’s-eye right on his chest. His eyes pressed shut as he anticipated oblivion and the roar of the ASP cannon made him tense when he heard it. There was a bright flash, even visible behind his tightly shut eyes, and an explosion, but it seemed so far away. The Marine pried open his eyes just a little and smiled widely when he saw the spectacle. The ASP nearest the top of the mountain swiveled on its base and roared off another shot. A second ASP, nearest to the bottom was hit and jerked wildly, then fell from its perch, tossing and tumbling down the steep slope. Gung Ho’s eyes widened. The lead ASP was taking all the other gun pods out, one by one. The two remaining Assault System Pods whirled their barrels around, honing in on the ASP that sat perched near the top. Before they could fire, the top ASP launched another volley, cutting clean through the right hand pod. As the top half of the ASP flew into freefall and exploded in a bright flash against the unforgiving earth, the other simply exploded, even though the last ASP had not fired at it. The explosion was from within, and bloomed outward like a yellow and orange flower, dropping blue shrapnel and chunks of metal down with the pouring rain. Gung Ho ran over to Bullhorn who lay at a strange angle, but was still breathing normally, and swiped the goggles from his belt. He placed them securely over his face and smiled broadly when he saw Hit & Run doing the same, with a green camouflaged arm waving in the wind. He was climbing out of the top ASP, and Gung Ho could see a Rock Viper hanging out of the cockpit, his arms dangling. The Marine shifted his vision down and to the left at the ASP that had exploded spontaneously, and saw Alpine rappelling down from the ledge, his automatic slung over his shoulder. Minutes later, they were on ground and greeted by a relieved Marine squad leader. They both looked around in confusion.

“Where the heck is everyone?” Alpine asked, scoping the surroundings.

“We all dove for cover when the bombing started. I haven’t tracked everyone down yet, but six eyes are better than two, c’mon!” The three Joes combed the path, the treeline and the area around the towering volcano. Within half an hour, everyone was accounted for, with one exception.

“Where’s ‘Zooka?” Alpine asked, looking around with some nervousness.

Gung Ho placed a reassuring hand on the mountain climber’s shoulder. “He was right next to the Mauler when it got it…I don’t think his chances are good. Even if he is alive, there’s no way we can dig him out of that heap of metal.”

“We’re just going to write him off?” Alpine asked, visibly irritated.

“No…but we have to wait for Hawk to get here. Right now, our duty is to these men,” he cast a hand towards the row of Joes that lay there before them. The fires had died somewhat, but there was enough light to see what serious condition the Joe team was in. Bullhorn sat on the left, his left arm hastily wrapped in a makeshift sling. Lifeline adjusted it slightly, and then turned to Gung Ho.

“Everyone is accounted for except Bazooka, Gung Ho, and none of them are dead…yet.” The word was said with disturbing certainty. “Bullhorn has a severely dislocated shoulder and some superficial burns. Spearhead…” he continued, moving his attention to the next man lying there, who was still quite conscious and aware. “Spearhead is still hanging in there, but will need an evac ASAP. Outback is quite the worse for wear.” He gestured to the man who lay there in the t-shirt and camouflage pants. The normal wording on the shirt was torn away, revealing his bare chest, and some nasty looking bruising. His long orange hair was slightly matted with a dried substance, and his eyes were non-responsive. “He appears to have a concussion and seems to have been struck in the chest with a large hunk of shrapnel. There are most likely some internal injuries, the severity of which I cannot discern without serious medical attention. If he is not airlifted from this island by morning, this man is dead.” It was a solid factual account…said without hesitation or question. An unusual tone of voice for a medic. His eyes were solid and unwavering, but his lip quivered ever so slightly.

“As long as that radar is active, no plane is getting in here or out of here, Lifeline. You know that,” Gung Ho replied.

“Well, hopefully that gives the infiltration team plenty of time to get it done. Let’s all hope they can do it.”

“They’ll do it,” said Clutch scowling and cracking his knuckles. A thin red streak ran down his forehead.

“Are you going to let me check that out?” Lifeline asked, standing and reaching for Clutch’s head.

“No,” Clutch said, pulling away. “Worry about the guys who really need your help.”

“All right, boys…here’s the plan. Lifeline, Bullhorn, Outback, Spearhead, Clutch, Repeater, Airtight and Alpine. I want you guys staying here. Whoever’s healthy work at digging away that Mauler any chance you get.” He turned to the other men standing behind him. “Zap and Hit & Run, you guys are coming with me.”

“Where are you going?” Repeater asked, hoisting up his stedi-cam and locking it into position on his right hip.

“We’ve still got a mission, boys. I mean to keep going.”

“No vehicles? Three troops? Through a wall of HISS Tanks and Stingers? You been eating your own gumbo again, Gung Ho?” Alpine asked, smirking.

“We’ve just gotta clear the path, troop. As soon as the radar’s down, we call in the reserves.”

“Hawk’s already an hour overdue, Gung Ho,” said Airtight. “Perhaps there are no reserves.”

“Spoken like a true soldier, Airtight! Well, then…we cross that bridge when we come to it. But we are on a strict timeline, people. Are you with me?”

“Yes, sir!”

“I thought so. Hit & Run…Zap…Let’s move out!”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

**Skirmish**

The thrashing, slamming rains, soaked through the air itself. Howling wind blistered the earth with its whipping abusive force driving the slick drops down at a sharp angle. The formerly dry sand broke apart underneath the barrage and shimmered, then melted into churning brown water and thick rolling mud. Visibility through the downpour was limited at best, and the cold, harsh rain rendered the Night Viper’s scopes all but useless. They struggled to filter out the shockingly chilly surroundings, but still only registered as wavy blue/green warbles rippling through the sensitive equipment.

“Nothing, NV-14, nothing at all,” the Night Viper reported, halting in the thick, muddy ground.

“Destro wants a report.” The lead Night Viper turned to the three fellow night warfare experts that joined him in this small patrol.

“Even in this storm, human heat signatures would show. They must have regrouped,” NV-7 replied. He turned his head back towards the path they had just walked up. It was a straight passage from the edge of the volcano. The tree line started not fifty feet to the south and to the north; the volcano wall had given way to an open expanse of land. He looked back where they were heading, back towards Cobra Central…towards the “Cluster”. It was named for a small grouping of buildings near the center of Cobra Island, which formerly served as the command center for the whole Cobra organization. Now it was merely a concrete and dirt/gravel graveyard, the only significantly undamaged building the concrete bunker-like Citadel. The large stone god, peering over its land with a single bay window eye, making sure all was well. All was not well tonight…and it would only get worse. Even in daylight and sunshine, the Citadel was not quite visible from this far away, but the Night Viper could picture it clearly in his mind’s eye. Ahead of him, the path continued on its flat crest for a few feet, and then drove steeply downward to a small clearing about one mile east of the Cluster. He could also picture in his head the HISS formation coming together at the edge of central command. Destro’s intimidating visage glaring over his tanks, leading the group to certain victory. That raised his confidence level a great deal, although with Cobra at a fraction of its strength, he still wasn’t so sure. When The Commander had begun shipping off the personnel and armaments, no one was particularly concerned. They were all sure there was some kind of plan…some kind of reasoning; although now, they were all fairly uncertain of what even the near future might hold. But Cobra Commander had a knack for pulling things together and so far, the attackers had indeed been stopped cold. Colder than a dead fish. The Night Viper had even heard that eight of them had been captured. With a wrinkled twist, he smirked behind the faceplate, content in the realization that there was nothing to fear from these attackers. Nothing that they could not handle. Everything was tightly under control.

“Well, Fourteen,” the Night Viper said, “I think they have been contained. We have lost contact with the ASPs, but there are no heat signatures for the next two klicks. It could just be the storm.”

“Very well, Seven. I will let you give Destro that little report, all right?”

Seven nodded somewhat stiffly.

“Let’s move out.”

The four Night Vipers collected themselves and spun around, then began climbing the slight incline, walking in low crouches, heads scanning and weapons trained.

Gung Ho slowly lowered the night vision goggles as he was violently pelted with the falling raindrops. The four silhouettes slowly wandered from view, his eyes squinting tightly to try and adjust to the dull darkness of night shrouded by rain clouds. With a low grunt, he picked himself up from his laying position, his muscles moving sluggishly underneath the thick soaked layers of cool mud that covered his entire body. Just to his right, Hit & Run peeled himself from the mud as if crawling from a shallow grave; his green uniform plastered with chunky gray/brown clumps of dripping earth. His knuckles were whitened underneath the pale green flesh paint with the tight grip of his AR-15 assault rifle. Zap rose just behind the other two, wet mud sliding from the LAW rocket launcher strapped to his arced back. He also held an assault rifle in both hands, and his eyes squinted from the visor built into his dull gray helmet. Gung Ho signaled the two other men to proceed ahead with him as they had done for the past two miles. Following the Night Vipers had proven less difficult than originally thought, seeing as how the small patrol had stuck to the tree line and had to progress slowly through the thick woods. Two miles of crouch walking and low crawling through the mud had been somewhat exhausting and Gung Ho was actually quite pleased when he saw the crest up ahead, knowing that it would make for a perfect vantage point for the troops they were following. With a swift signal, he and his two teammates had double-timed it to the base of the slope, the horrendous rainstorm covering the sounds of their feet slapping through the loose, muddy soil. They had buried themselves mere moments before the Night Vipers had stopped and turned, looking out from the highest point of the once dirt path. The cold mud had done its job well, completely masking their body heat from thermal sensors. Lying in the thick ground had also guaranteed their immobility so motion and radar failed to detect them as well. Now with the rain thrashing down around them and the wet mud splashing up from their thudding boots, the three Joes rushed forward, assault rifles at the ready. The four Cobras hit the edge of the crest and continued down the other side, their ears drowned out by the wild storm around them. Gung Ho skidded to a quick halt and lifted his M-16/203 combination rifle to his squinting eye. The faintest sliver of moon cast an eerie glow over the terrain and a light blur of movement flashed above the triangular sight above the long, slender barrel. The rifle barked loud and long, riddling the dark night with sporadic flashes of illumination. The butt drove hard into the Marine’s curled, muscular shoulder as his weapon exploded to life and sent the Viper flying clumsily forward, somersaulting end over end through the wet mud of the downward slope. The other three Cobras spun with the abrupt noise and swiftly returned fire, sending the Joes scattering and dropping. Hit & Run and Zap dashed ahead of the momentarily stopped Gung Ho, their guns lifting. The light infantryman dropped to one knee, while the AR-15 jumped up into position and the gun quickly roared with an angry scream, spewing bright light and smoke from its thin black barrel. Another Night Viper flew from his feet and tumbled backwards out of sight. With sudden quickness, the two remaining Cobras ducked and ran, vanishing down from the top of the hill.

“Shoot!” shouted Gung Ho. The small team had reacted much more quickly than he had anticipated. “If those boys get within communication range, the whistle is officially blown!” He waved his arm forward as he lurched to his feet and the other two Joes followed closely behind. Long-range communication on the island had been severely compromised due to Blackout’s radar interference and the cooperation of Mother Nature, who was assaulting the island with driving rain. Small groups of different roving Cobras were necessary to feed Cobra Central the information and intelligence they needed. As far as central command was concerned, at the moment the Joes were halted and being bombarded at the volcano. Gung Ho didn’t want them thinking any differently. With hurtling speed, especially over the chunky, hard to navigate muddy ground, the Joes hit the flat top of the hill and proceeded quickly downward, their feet skidding slightly on the wet, slippery surface of the path. Cloud cover carried in by the strong gulf winds moved in without warning and the night was bathed in an inky darkness, almost completely obscuring the Joes’ much needed night vision. The path continued down into blackness, swallowed by the deep, dark night. Gung Ho could vaguely make out a clearing of some kind at the bottom of the hill, but it was quite impossible to tell what lay beyond. Visions of a platoon of night Vipers waiting in ambush paraded through his active brain and he slowed the progress to a light jog.

“Slow it up, Joes,” he said seriously. “This is ambush central---.” His voice had barely trailed off when the pitch-blackness of night was completely vaporized. The dark sky colored curtain tore apart like tissue paper as white-hot light exploded around them. Five pairs of too-large, bright squinting eyes blinked open in the clearing, slamming the Joes with an almost physical impact. Gung Ho cursed as he backpedaled, then spun and ran, Hit & Run and Zap close on his heels. Even before they reached the halfway point of the hill, the beasts’ voices joined their twin piercing halogen eyes. A low, throaty growl rumbled deep in the once dark night, all five merging into one shuddering roar of anger. The yellow light eyes shook violently with the power of the grumbling engines and the growl went from deep to shrill, to a high pitched whine as the quintet of motors obliterated the silence with their deafening bellow. The five High Speed Sentries lurched forward in the loose, wet soil, their treads struggling to find a solid footing even as the Joes continued their upward progress. Mud sprayed in wide arcs behind the black tanks as they hurtled forward, slipping across the rolling waters that were once solid ground. The first HISS spun wildly to the right, but then caught hold and pressed forward, leading the small group up the slippery slope. They moved slowly, desperately groping for solid ground up the steep incline.

“Snakes led us straight into a HISS nest!” shouted Gung Ho, his legs pumping fiercely, dragging his massive frame up the seemingly impossibly steep slope. Sheets of rain pounded their moving bodies as they ran, framed by a bath of halogen-produced light roaring behind them. Zap skidded to a halt, his LAW almost jumping off his shoulder and into his ready hands, the HISS tanks bearing down on the three Joes.

“Zap!” Gung Ho shouted. “No time to be a hero!”

“Hero nothing!” Zap shouted as he lifted the gray cylinder up onto his shoulder, the viewfinder pressing against his thin visor on his helmet. “I’m just saving my own skin!” The LAW roared with a shuddering slam, the round barrel thrashing back on Zap’s shoulder. Bright light and licks of flame blasted from the end, and a winding trail of gray smoke chased the orange streak of the rocket that sliced cleanly through the air. Zap had already spun back around and continued up the hill as a brilliant pounding of brightness and smoke swallowed the lead HISS, throwing it off course and tumbling down the slope it had desperately been trying to climb. It bounced away from the group and the four remaining tanks continued their lumbering ascent. Zap let the launcher bounce back against his back in the strap, realizing that he had no time to reload another missile to fire again. The mud coursed from the three men’s bodies, washed by the falling rain as they drove their feet into the deep mud, struggling towards the peak of the hill. Thunder shook the skies above, and before it faded the tanks let loose with a barrage of thunder of their own. Two pairs of barrels shook and screamed, blasts of orange flame and gray smoke belching from them. The Joes threw themselves roughly to the wet mud, the large bore rounds whizzing over their heads as they rolled. Another pair of shots echoed in the night and a large chunk of ground erupted from the earth as if vomited. Smoke shot in the air as HISS rounds hit just to their right. The Joes scrambled forward until the stumbled to a rest on the flat crest of the hill. They were safe for a moment, their pursuers’ headlights beaming up into the night sky as the tanks continued the steep climb. At the angle they were at, it was impossible for the turrets to lower enough to shoot them, but the tanks were pressing on and there was little time to waste.

“Zap, load up another rocket!” Gung Ho shouted as he unslung his black rifle.

“We making a stand here, amigo?” Zap asked, checking the digital readout on the cylindrical rocket launcher as he slid a thin, silver missile from his chest into the LAW.

“No way!” Gung Ho shouted. “I just want to be ready. Right now, we run like scared little girls!” He pointed down the slope, back towards the volcano. The HISS tanks barreled up the hill behind them, their lights growing in fierce intensity. As the engines’ roar tore through the Joes, they drew their respective breaths, tensed and dashed down the slick slope. The dark of night swallowed them once more as they plunged down the steep decline, leaving the bright beams of light plowing through the late night sky. The engines’ growl had faded somewhat, but now bellowed back to life as the tanks pushed a little more to reach the apex of the hill. Gung Ho glanced back, the ‘203 clutched tightly in his arms and his breath even tighter in his lungs. The rain still drove down in buckets and the three Joes were now almost completely clean of the once chunky mud that clung to the surface of their skin and uniforms. The Marine squad leader squinted as the tanks pitched swiftly back downward and continued the pursuit, the Joes once again caught like deer in their powerful headlights. As soon as the figures appeared in the light, the cannons blazed, eight large flashes brightening the night sky. The turrets were still slightly too elevated and the bulk of the barrage blew craters in the soft earth a few yards ahead of the running soldiers. The rear HISS got a lucky shot and shells plowed into the ground hot on Hit & Run’s heels and the ground opened up like a fresh wound. Clumps of dirt, rocks and shrapnel spun and flew in all directions, the force of the blast throwing all three men into uncontrolled spins. The Joes tumbled roughly forward, completely out of control and found themselves rolling end over end through the mud and wet soil. The surroundings swirled together as if they were in the worlds’ largest clothes dryer, as ground became sky and vice versa, mud flying and thunder rocking in their ears. The tanks continued their relentless pursuit, roaring down towards the hapless soldiers as they bounced clumsily down the hill and came to an uncomfortable stop at the bottom. Hit & Run tried to climb to his feet, his head swimming and ears ringing. Everything around him blended together into a nightmarish vision of muck, black sky and piercing, soulless lights. His rifle clung loosely to his fingers just barely as he stood on shaky knees and prepared to run from the four metal beasts that pursued him. As he stood Gung Ho and Zap stumbled to their feet as well, each one still grasping their precious weapons as fire continued to rain down, tearing trenches in the earth and blowing rocks into so many jagged pebbles. The three soldiers lurched forward, but the noise halted them. Deafening roars assaulted them from all sides and angles, but now a new sound arose. A new, slightly different grumbling, vibrating through their auditory canals, but coming from a different direction. And at a different pitch. It was a wild, shaking, piercing shout that seemed to shake the ground itself as it bore down on them. From the *other side.* Gung Ho tried to shake the cobwebs loose, but the growl continued as a large dark shape lumbered towards them from the direction of the volcano, sliding over the earth with incredible speed, especially considering the state of the mushy ground. The Joes stumbled back, clawing for whatever cover they could find as this new threat approached, its growl increasing in vicious ferocity, hitting with such power that a strong wind seemed to emit from it, slamming into the three soldiers. The tanks dropped into rough formation behind the Joes, their turrets adjusting for maximum impact. But the three Joes were oblivious, their sights locked tightly on the dark, ominous shape looming before them. It halted and seemed to float there, considering its options. Then, consideration was over, and it opened fire.

Destro sat proudly in the turret of the HISS, his piercing eyes glaring over his squadron, about a dozen jet black tanks, ready and waiting for action. Far off in the distance, the low growl of combat sounded. Multiple thundering roars of cannon fire, and the occasional light chatter of small arms. It was almost a comfortable sound.

“Any word from the Night Vipers?” the voice echoed in his steel mask.

“No, Baroness,” he replied simply, moving his head slowly back and forth to take in the land in front of him. The valley was large and open in front of the Cluster, which was scattered about behind him and to the south. The Citadel sat proudly above the other broken down buildings, which scattered the landscape mostly south of the Citadel, but a few in the valley itself. A large rock formation jutted up into the air behind the bunker-like fortress, reaching up towards the sky, a desperate young mountain yearning to grow large and looming like it elder brethren. Machine gun nests were also scattered along the valley, some using sandbags and others utilizing the broken down remnants of buildings and constructs. ASPs had been somewhat hastily set up around the front perimeter of the valley, which faced to the east and to a large, sloping hill that ran down from the path between the tree line and the volcano. The trees cut a sharp ninety-degree angle and opened up into the valley as well, almost like a green leafed picket fence surrounding the concrete, humorless abode. A light pound of thunder roared in the sky, but he couldn’t tell if it was nature, or pure, unnatural manmade combat.

“Soon,” he said softly, unaware that he was softly patting the turret of the tank. “Very soon.”

The sky split and crashed with thunder, in the skies, and on the island’s storm blasted surface. With muffled shouts, the three Joes hurled themselves to the ground, holding their rifles beneath them and squinting their eyes tightly closed. It was all happening so suddenly, and it appeared the only way to go was down. The large monster in front of them seemed to fire from all places at once, huge blasts of orange and yellow streaks of missile fire.

*Nothing to do* thought Gung Ho, *but put your head between your knees and kiss your butt good-bye.* His eyes pressed tightly together as the night air exploded with scorching heavy fire, artillery, and rockets. The earth itself seemed to shake with the thunderous blows and Gung Ho tensed, preparing for his quick trip straight to oblivion underneath the stormy skies of Cobra Island.

It quickly became evident, however, that the muscular Marine’s trip to oblivion would not be nearly as quick as he had thought. The bright blasts of gun and missile fire tore through the air—

--and struck the HISS group head on. Gung Ho felt the hot wind whoosh over his head and back. He could only imagine the shell searing the air itself as it passed by. The sharp diesel twang of rocket fuel expelled into exhaust flooded his olfactory senses. However, the damage done to his sense of smell was nothing compared to the damage done to the quartet of jet-black Cobra tanks. The lead tank crumpled like tin foil as a shell plowed into the cockpit and evaporated the person inside. Streaking, swirling yellow flashes of missiles whistled through the air, puffy, wisping tails of smoke chasing them eagerly. They collided with the two tanks on the left; a clang of metal on metal, a blinding flash, then the rush of smoke, and a splintering blast showered HISS pieces along the muddy path. The last tank slammed on its brakes, but as it skidded slightly askew, another shell drove into the front treads demolishing them and sending the black hunk of metal tumbling. It hit the ground with a resounding crash, forcefully ejecting the two occupants, who hit the ground clumsily, but amazingly enough crawled to their feet and began to return fire. Orange tracers streaked through the black air and threw the two snakes to the wet ground like so much day old garbage. They stumbled clumsily to the soft ground and lay still, the gunfire ceasing to a strange, lingering echo. The silence was deafening. Faint echoes of explosions and gunfire rippled through the air like waves, but other than the low rumble and hiss of the Joe’s unknown saviors, the night air was quiet once more. Rain pattered down on the Joes lying sprawled along the path, their eyes uncertain, bodies filthy, and muscles sore. Smoke lingered like a bar room, minutes after last call, the light crackle and hiss of fires being hit by rain a strange, soothing background. Gung Ho stood shakily, his large, but tired muscles arguing considerably. He scooped up his rifle from the wet mud and looked around, locking eyes with his other two teammates who rose to join him. They stared uncertainly at the large shadow in front of them, and it glided slowly forward, now caught in the ambient light of burning tanks.

“Ahoy Land Lubbers!” the shout barked from atop the vehicle.

Gung Ho smiled even as sour rainwater beat down on his bald, dirty head. “Cutter, you salty dog!” He shouted. “About time you second stringers showed up!”

The Whale slipped into full view, its deep green hull and dark rubber bottom a sight for sore eyes. It was a long and large vehicle, almost invisible against the dark blind of night, but Gung Ho had seen it enough times for his mind to fill in the blanks. The angled bow, with a swinging door and Plexiglas windshield used for troop transport. The twin .50 caliber heavy machine gun turrets nestled just beyond. The command center was a small square cubicle perched right on top of the large hovercraft, protected only by a small metal wall and a ring of flimsy plexi around the top. A missile launcher was neatly perched on each side of the command center, just in front of the large, powerful rotors, used to propel the massive all-purpose vehicle over sea or land. To complete the wide array of armament, one extremely large bore artillery cannon sat on each side of the Whale, capable of rapid and quite destructive firepower. Roadblock flashed a smirk to the Marine from one of the gun turrets, which smoked slightly after the tracers it had stitched across the chests of the Cobras. Leatherneck was in the next turret, his moustache curled over the ever-present frown, underneath his thick mop of dark hair and camouflage cap. Hawk vaulted smoothly down from his spot in the command center next to Cutter, hit the ground gracefully considering it was mostly mud, and strode over to the Marine. The cargo door swung open as he did so, revealing the troops inside. Hawk motioned to the hovercraft and Hit & Run and Zap proceeded inside, smiles wide on their faces.

“Sorry we’re late, troop,” Hawk said quite honestly. “We had to make a slight detour to pull their chestnuts out of the fire.” He tossed his head towards the cargo door where Torpedo stood, solemn as always. Just behind him sitting in the hold was Topside, his arm in a sling and a white bandage wrapped tightly around his head, just under the short cropped blonde hair.

“Figures,” Gung Ho said, with just the hint of a smile. “Where’s my team?”

“We left them two klicks back, soldier. The Wolverine is fully stocked and back there with them.”

“Sounds good, General. Now with all due respect, let’s go pick them up, huh?”

“Read my mind, Gung Ho.”

The Marine filed into the cargo hold while his commanding officer hopped back up into the small cockpit and command center. The Whale gunned its massive turbines, rose slightly on a cushion of air, spun and raced off into the night.

The side trip to the storage lockers had proceeded without interference and within moments, the ex-prisoners were fully locked and loaded. Flint ditched his Cobra uniform and retrieved his familiar leather jacket, sleeves rolled up above the elbows, camouflage fatigues and beret. He was now fully loaded, twin straps of shotgun shells running down over his chest and his shotgun clutched firmly in hand. Wet Suit had salvaged most of his SEAL uniform and appropriated two MP5’s for his use. Everyone else merely grabbed all of their original equipment and all the ammunition they could carry. The hallway was still slick and smooth and large, leading down away from the small alcove that had hid the lockers. It ran for about a hundred yards, and then branched out into a larger, more cavernous passageway through the underground fortress. There were no more doors present, the arcing hallway feeding forward like an artery pumping fluid to its large computer controlled heart. The Cobra prisoner tapped Duke lightly on the shoulder as they shuffled forward, their footsteps almost inaudible even in the echoing hallway. The First Sergeant spun slowly, his face still somewhat distrusting towards their newfound comrade. The young man had re-equipped himself as well, wearing dark blue Cobra fatigues and the round helmet over his neatly cropped dark hair. His face was not masked, and appeared harmless, but his familiar enemy appearance still made the Joes uneasy. He had an AK-47 taken from the locker slung over one shoulder and looked very much like the Cobra troopers Duke had been tangling with since he first met the infamous terrorist group. The story he told was convincing, and enough to lead anyone to believe his intentions were good and he surely wanted revenge on his former employer…but trust was something that had to be earned, especially for a supposedly ex Cobra agent. Duke knew that a change of heart was possible even for a terrorist. Numerous missions with a top secret Joe agent named Mercer had convinced him of that. If Mercer could leave a high-ranking position in the Viper corps and join the Joe forces, then surely this young man was capable of the slightest need for revenge. Still, his men’s safety was the Sergeant’s number one concern, and that concern dictated that he proceed with this relationship with the utmost caution. He held up a motionless hand and the column of Joes stopped. Flanking Duke and the Rotor Viper was Flint, Falcon and Stalker, and then Beachhead, Muskrat, Recondo and Claymore followed closely behind by the somewhat limping, but quite capable Ripcord and Wet Suit bringing up the rear. Duke looked at his troops through swollen eyes, his face still marked by Gulag’s punishing blows, but covered with a confident, assured calmness.

“What’s the deal, kid?” Duke asked the Rotor Viper, who was squinting up ahead where the hallway branched out. They spoke in hushed, quiet whispers, and the young Cobra directed them all in closer.

“Guard change happens in a few minutes,” he whispered, glancing at his watch. “There are single guards posted on each side of the hallway, but we must take them out before the night shift comes, which will increase the presence dramatically.”

Duke cocked his head at the young man, who appeared quite well adjusted and capable of making tough decisions on the fly. What made a kid like this join up with Cobra? Duke couldn’t tell, but was pretty sure that he would have made an excellent soldier.

“All right,” the Sergeant said quietly. “Any volunteers?” he asked, glancing around the small group. Everyone began to raise hands, but Stalker spoke out first, slapping Beachhead in the chest as he did. “Let us do it, Top.” He said, determination in his eye.

“How’s the shoulder, Stalker?” Duke asked motioning to the bandage still wrapped around the Army Ranger’s large muscular arm.

“Don’t worry yourself about it,” Stalker said grimly and moved on, Beachhead close behind. They walked uncomfortably close to the ground, their feet shuffling skillfully and noiselessly over the hard concrete floor. Machine guns slapped against their backs as they walked, strapped securely over their broad torsos.

“Rangers lead the way,” Stalker said with a wink and nod. Beachhead smiled underneath his green knit mask and gave a thumbs up. They continued the brisk walk down the wall swiftly and silently, and then pressed their backs up against opposite walls, letting their weapons slide down to their sides. Each man’s expertly trained eyes scoped the large hallway cutting through the belly of Cobra Island, each way leading to who knew where. One Viper stood perched at each side of the entrance just as promised. The florescent lights rippled over their silver faceplates and deep, blue helmets. These two particular Vipers appeared quite formidable, their muscles bulging under tight fitting blue fatigues and their black and red flack vests almost popping from the strain of their huge, barrel chests. A long, slender gray machine gun was gripped in each one’s hands, one hand on each of the two handles, the long round barrel pointed to the floor. A small grenade launcher was attached to the underside of the barrel, and a thin scope ran along the top of the magazine. Seeing as how they were merely on guard duty, they wore no backpacks and stood flush with the wall on each side of the hallway’s intersection. Stalker inched ever closer, as did his Army Ranger partner across the hall. The Vipers were a mere foot away, around the corner, their heavy, echoed breathing audible underneath the round, reflective masks. The man in the beret held up three fingers, stiff and straight, his eyes flicking just to the left to make sure they weren’t spotted. Beachhead tensed his muscles as the fingers shot up, curling his arms and bending slightly at the knees. Stalker did the same as he dropped down to two fingers, and then left just his index sitting straight. In one fluid motion he yanked in the last finger, clenched his fist and moved. With green-brown blurs of motion they went into furious Army Ranger action. Stalker spun around the corner lightning quick, wrapping his large camouflaged arms around the unsuspecting Viper’s head. With a twist, he yanked the trooper around the corner and stepped into his range of motion, making a firearm useless. As he drew the Viper in close, he threw his knee forward and drilled it deep into the Cobra’s gut, doubling him over fiercely. As he went down, Stalker wrapped his arm around his neck, and then jerked suddenly and with finality, the crack muffling under his armpit. The Ranger released his grip and the corpse dropped to the floor with a dull thump. Beachhead dropped low and moved in swiftly, then drove up suddenly into his opponent’s armpit and whipped around, flipping him effortlessly over one shoulder. The Cobra trooper slammed into the concrete floor, the masked Ranger following closely behind, his elbow pounding into his sternum as he hit. A muffled *pop* echoed through the hall, and both Vipers lay sprawled on the floor, not moving. It had taken scant seconds. While the Rangers unstrapped their own weapons, the other Joes moved in while the Rotor Viper broke off to check out the hall. Stalker rotated his shoulder, wincing slightly and ignoring the disapproving look Duke gave him before he and Flint left to join the Cobra in the hallway. They glanced around, seeing the hallway branch off in two opposite directions. Another hallway veered off directly across from them, and to their right the large, cavernous passage seemed to disappear into the shadows. Off to the left, it circled around and led somewhere; a place that gave off lots of light and where Duke could hear a bustle of activity, even from this far away.

“The Command Center is that way,” the Rotor Viper instructed, pointing towards the left. “If you want to take out the radar, that’s the way to go.”

“What about that?” Flint asked, stabbing a finger towards the hall across the way.

“Training room and laboratory. Trust me, this is the way,” he gestured slightly as he lifted his AK-47 and headed off.

“You heard the man,” Duke said to the other Joes, nodding towards the left-hand side. He turned himself, but was only halfway around when the sudden, loud voice pounded through the corridor, catching everyone by surprise.

“HEY!”

Duke finished spinning around, but wished he hadn’t as he spotted the group of Vipers running around the corner towards their left, weapons at the ready.

“Cover!” Duke shouted as the main hall erupted in wild gunfire. The soldiers scrambled for the floor as bullets roared through the large hall, sending orange and yellow sparks dancing across the walls, spewing chunks of concrete and miniature plumes of smoke. The floor blasted apart under the assault, geysers of floor shooting up into the air, licking at Rotor Viper’s heels as he dove for cover.

“We need backup!” the lead Viper shouted as the man next to him was thrown against the wall under a hail of return fire. “Seal the Command Center! NOW!” he shouted back around the corner as he lifted his own rifle to his shoulder and pumped out a thunderous barrage, shell casings spinning over the cement floor. A deep rumble sent the hallway shuddering and the tell tale scraping of reinforced concrete grating across metal reverberated through the corridor. The light shining from around the corner began to dim, little by little.

“No!” Shouted the Rotor Viper. “If that door shuts we have no access to the Command Center!”

Duke scowled as he whipped around the corner, rattled off some return fire, then ducked back around as the wall broke apart, sending metal and plaster chips skidding over his red tinted flesh. He winced as the smoke stung his eyes, but opened his mouth to bark orders anyway. “Then we have to move now, Joes!”

Muskrat slammed the pump back on his automatic shotgun and roared off a blast, the long black weapon jumping in his tight grip, shell casings dancing along the smooth floor. The Joe swamp fighter dove as return fire shredded the cloud of smoke lingering in the air just above his head. “Are we feeling suicidal today, Top?” he asked, pressing a hand against his head to keep his treasured green boonie hat firmly on his light colored hared head. He sat up, pressing his back against the wall, sweat running in branching rivers down his scowling face.

“That’s why we get the big bucks!” Recondo shouted and charged into the fray, his own shotgun pounding loud, sharp cracks in the hallway. Vipers scrambled frantically.

“Speak for yourself! I’m not being paid jack!” Flint barked as he jumped forward, then rolled smoothly under a blast of fire. With swift grace, he rolled back up into a crouch and roared off a group of shots with his large bore weapon.

Duke shook his head but smirked in spite of himself, drew a deep breath, lifted his weapon and charged into the belly of the beast.

Cobra Commander shot up in his throne when the gunfire erupted through the complex, sounding far too close for his comfort.

“What is going on here?” he demanded, the two Immortals immediately coming to him, blocking him from the gaping entrance of the command center where the gunfire echoed. Snakebite cocked his shotgun and glared into the large, echoing hallway. Suddenly Vipers from all over the center scrambled to action, running frantically towards the entrance as the call for backup echoed through the large, computer filled room.

“This is intolerable! Who are these buffoons?” he screamed, glaring out into the hallway. Gunfire ripped through the hall, sparks flying and smoke spiraling from spent shells and pounded bullet holes. “Snakebite, where is Destro?” the Commander demanded angrily.

“You sent him out to lead the HISS squadron, Commander.”

“What about The Baroness? Scrap Iron? Overlord for crying out loud?”

“They’re all occupied, Commander. Things are happening all over the island.”

“Blast!” Cobra Commander shouted throwing his arms into the air. “Do I have to do everything myself?”

In the hall, a Viper grunted and skidded across the floor under a barrage of gunfire. With a low rumble, the thick, concrete door began to crawl down its tracks to seal off the Command Center.

“Perhaps we should relocate, Commander?” Zartan asked, coming up behind the broad shouldered man in the royal blue uniform. He held an automatic in his right hand, his white eyes squinting out from under his hood.

“Don’t be preposterous! Things are perfectly safe here. The door will be shut soon, and I have you to protect me, yes?” he smiled broadly under the flowing cloth hood.

“Of course, Commander, although I think we should send reinforcements to the motor pool to ensure that…the ‘delivery’ goes off without a hitch.”

Cobra Commander seemed to ponder this statement for a few moments. “Very well, Zartan. Collect a handful of troops and go do that for me. Snakebite and the Immortals can handle my safety.”

“As you command,” Zartan said with a nod then turned and left. Cobra Commander sighed and moved back to his throne, glaring out into the hall where Vipers flooded in under a constant hail of fire. The large door had only moved mere inches, but The Commander smiled broadly, enjoying the show.

“I think Zartan had a point, sir,” Snakebite said, the slightest bit of concern in his normally emotionless, metallic voice. “This location appears to be somewhat unsafe.”

The Commander glanced around at the monitors spread around the command center. A number of Vipers, Techno Vipers, Tele Vipers and Cyber Vipers still littered the center, all glued to their respective screens and areas.

“Balderdash, Snakebite. I couldn’t be safer here. Please…I’m enjoying the show,” he said, motioning to the hallway. Three Vipers were now strewn along the floor and another was hunched against the far wall, a wet stain dripping above him, leaving a dark trail to where he lay.

“Very well,” Snakebite said, lowering his shotgun, but not moving from his leader’s side. Slowly, the door continued its decent.

The Whale slid into the clearing at the base of the volcano, its turbines growling, and the slightest hiss of expelled air coming from the rubber raft it rode on. The clearing looked much like Gung Ho left it, although it was now more visible, being illuminated by several powerful halogen lamps set up around the perimeter. The Mauler still lay in rubble by the volcano, a group of Joes standing by, desperately trying to free the man trapped inside. The Wolverine sat at an angle near the entrance to the clearing, it’s massive missile racks pointed out towards the path. At the sound of the approaching vehicle, the RAM purred lightly from the treeline and skidded to a slow halt, Bullhorn hopping off and slinging his large rifle over his somewhat tensed and bandaged shoulder. Cover Girl dropped from her familiar treaded vehicle and approached the all-purpose hovercraft as it eased to a stop and slid open the cargo door. The rain had let up somewhat, the various fires were doused, but thick, acrid smoke still hung in the air, and the destruction was downright shocking. Even more so that no Joe lives had yet been claimed. Faded moonlight also added to the halogen light, casting the terrain in an eerie glow, which helped visibility, but increased the spookiness of this nighttime insertion. Gung Ho glanced over to the crumpled Mauler where half a dozen Joes struggled with heavy, thick armor plating, trying desperately to free a friend they could only hope was still alive.

“How’s it going?” Gung Ho asked, glancing at Bullhorn.

“Not good. All the light work is done, but there’s a couple real heavy pieces which are still pinning him.”

“SitRep, Bullhorn?” Hawk asked, walking up from behind Gung Ho.

“Bazooka is still trapped, sir,” Bullhorn replied, giving an abbreviated and informal situation report. “We need some more hands.”

“Um…excuse me,” a small voice asked from behind the group. “Where is it?” Blackout asked coming into view. His eyes and nose were invisible under the reflective silver helmet he wore, but his mouth twitched nervously. His arms fidgeted under the red insulated, quilted uniform he wore, but his black and yellow legs stood stock-still.

“Over there,” Gung Ho said wearily, pointing to the smoldering tank.

Blackout’s silver helmeted head nodded and he plucked an equally silver object from a strap on one thigh.

“What’s that?” the Marine asked, following the young new blood.

“It’s a self-igniting acetylene torch. With the push of a button, a searing blue flame shoots out. Can be used for welding, and should be hot enough to slice through armor plate.” He halted himself as he realized that Gung Ho was staring at him somewhat blankly. “I never leave home without it,” he finished with a light chuckle.

“Hmmm,” Gung Ho said softly, eyeing the new kid behind his back. Maybe there was a spot on the Joe team for an electronics and engineering expert.

Alpine and Airtight each held an end of the thick, tan charred hunk of armor plate that lay at a forty-five degree angle over other melted, crumpled chunks of metal. A single brown boot rested on the ground a few feet from the debris, the only sign that someone was underneath. They wrenched and yanked, groaning and straining, but the piece did not budge.

“Can I get in here?” Blackout asked politely as he approached the Mauler wreck, the torch clutched firmly in his hand. His thumb pressed down on the ignition switch and with a low poof, white-blue flame shot from the torch like a searing knife blade. It rippled slightly, and then held shape, a thin, piercing cone of pure scorching heat. The two men stepped cautiously back as Blackout plunged the sword of flame into the thick armor. Sparks whooshed over the new Joe’s tense body, smoke and flame shooting in bursts in all directions. The flame cut cleanly through the thick plate and minutes later the massive chunk split and fell apart with a squealing tear, revealing a pile of smaller and lighter debris. The Joes dug furiously, tossing metal plate and chunks of armor across the ground. Alpine groaned as he lifted a somewhat heavy piece, but his face lit up when he saw the mustached man looking up at him. His hair was singed and streaks of blood smeared across his face, but he opened his eyes and groaned slightly.

“A…about time. I was getting b…bored down here.”

Alpine signaled to Lifeline who dashed over and assessed the tank driver’s condition. Besides a broken leg, some injured ribs, and a scattering of first and second degree burns, all injuries were superficial. Alpine tried to hide his joy, but was failing miserably. The Joes were all gathered around, regrouping and assessing injuries and mental states of being. Seizing the opportunity, Hawk walked up and loudly cleared his throat.

“Gentlemen,” he said loudly and seriously. “As I am sure you have noticed, things have been far from smooth going so far.” His voice was solid and confident, and the men nodded slowly as he spoke. “However, that is in no way going to inhibit our ability to complete this mission. We must coordinate our assault with the assumption that the Strike Team has failed in their mission to drop the radar umbrella.”

“We’re going to combat assault the whole population of Cobra Island?” Repeater asked, his large bore heavy machine gun dangling from his right hip. “With all due respect, General, we have barely a platoon of troops and only three major sources of armament.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t know, Repeater. Unfortunately, the choice has already been made. It’s in our hands. The wavelength weapon must be stopped and there’s no one to do it except us.”

“Boy, does that sound familiar,” said Leatherneck rolling his eyes slightly.

Hawk straightened up slightly, the seriousness of the situation settling into his chiseled features. “Men, we are faced with a situation most dire tonight. By this time, Cobra knows they have been invaded, and if our Strike Team has failed, then they know who has invaded them. Cobra Commander will not hesitate to set this plan into action before we can stop him.” Hawk turned and looked into each one of his men’s eyes, squinting slightly under the glare of the lights. “Cobra has got us on the ropes. More so than I can ever remember…but one thing to remember is that a cornered man fights the hardest, and that is what we must do. We have already been dealt a serious blow. Our country’s leader has paid the ultimate price…seven of us may be captured or worse. We are outnumbered, outgunned, and out manned.” Each point was brought home with a soft tap of his fist in his open, bare hand. His eyes narrowed underneath his green helmet, and his motions rustled underneath the dark bomber jacket he wore. “But we must remember. Cobra is relatively blind at this point. This storm has significantly deterred their communications network, which allows us some measure of freedom. Besides, if we think we’re on the ropes, than undoubtedly, Cobra Commander thinks we’re beaten. We are not beaten, gentlemen. Quite far from it.” Hawk’s voice was rising slightly and all eyes were glued to their leader. “I see before me forty of the most capable, well trained soldiers I have ever had the pleasure of serving with. If anyone on this planet is capable of pulling off a mission this difficult…this downright hairy…it is you.” He crossed his arms over his broad chest, the words sinking in to the group of soldiers before him. “Any questions?” he asked with a stern gaze.

Repeater raised his hand swiftly.

“Yes, trooper?” Hawk asked nodding at the machine gunner.

“When do we start, sir?” he asked, his round face twisting into a confident grin.

Hawk returned the smirk. “Things have already started, Repeater. It’s up to us to finish it. For good.” His eyes narrowed even further. A deadly serious, determined glare. “Cover Girl, you Zap and Repeater, get on The Wolverine. Bullhorn you’ve got the RAM…Bazooka, Topside you two man the turrets on The Whale. Lifeline, get the wounded loaded on the hovercraft…and the rest of you mount up! It’s time to kick some butt and take some names!” He shouted pulling the chinstrap tight under his green helmet.

“YO JOE!”

A free fire zone was deadly and dangerous in any environment, but in this enclosed hallway, it was on the verge of suicidal. The small group of four Vipers had quickly grown to a dozen and the large hallway now seemed to contain more lead than air. Duke charged forward, his assault rifle clutched and aimed, an endless pounding of sparks and bullets slamming from the barrel. The main hall was straight from right to left, then curved around to the right again, making somewhat of an ‘S’ shape. Vipers were flooding from the Command Center and fired relentlessly at the Joe as they dashed forward, desperate to make it to the Command Center before the groaning, scraping reinforced concrete door could slide shut. Duke glanced to his left as he dropped and slid right to avoid a grouping of return fire from the three Vipers directly ahead of him. Just to his left Flint, Falcon, and Ripcord were pressed up against the near wall, firing erratically into the crowd of Cobra troops. The Vipers were strewn across the ground in various uncomfortable poses, but as of yet, no Joes had been hit. *Thank God for them little miracles* Duke thought as he crouch-ran to the rounded section of wall where the corridor wound around to go to the Command Center. Stalker, Beachhead, Claymore and Recondo were there already, grasping cover wherever they could find it. Muskrat crouched further back, down on one knee, almost out of the visual range of the Vipers. Wet Suit was directly behind him, loading more clips into his twin MP5’s. Bullets screamed through the center of the hallway, tearing a path in the air that the Joes dared not cross, but time was running out. The door was slow, that much Duke had surmised, but if they didn’t advance quickly, it would seal them off from their goal. The whole mission was riding on this, and their lives were inconsequential compared to the potential deaths on the North American seashore. With a deep breath, he slammed a new clip into his automatic and plunged forward, hauling down on the trigger. A pair of Vipers went spinning under the initial burst, one thrown harshly backwards and sent sliding along the floor, and the second caught it in the upper chest like a football tackle and tumbled awkwardly before lying still. The remaining group of Cobra troops all spun, their weapons trained on the First Sergeant. Duke tensed as he spent the rest of his clip, the rifle pumping in his sweaty grasp. A sharp report came from his left as he dodged and weaved and he twisted, seeing Muskrat run forward, his shotgun roaring. *He’s drawing fire!* Duke’s mind immediately snapped.

“Muskrat, don’t—“ before he could get out the rest of the sentence, a heavy thump pounded into his chest, high up, near his collarbone. White-hot pain exploded at the point of impact, and then seemed to flood the entire rest of his body with violent waves and ripples of dull ache. Suddenly his legs wouldn’t work, and he found himself flat on his back, his eyes squinting under the harsh white florescent light. There was a strange, sticky wetness floating around his body, and darkness seeped into his field of vision, before he finally blacked out.

“Duke’s down, Duke’s down!” shouted Muskrat, skidding to a swift halt. He spun and ran to his fallen buddy, but the Vipers adjusted their aim first and blasted away at the swamp fighter. Muskrat was hit in the shoulder first and sent spinning wildly before the next shot plowed into his right side into his ribcage. Thick, dark blood flew like a hunk of chewing tobacco and Muskrat grunted before sliding to a rough halt next to his leader.

“Damn!” screamed Stalker, pumping another clip into his M-16. “Two men down! Who’s our acting medic?” he asked, leaning out and pumping a few rounds at the Vipers.

“Muskrat was!” replied Recondo as he blasted off another shotgun round.

Stalker shook his head, and perked his ears, listening for the sound of the door. Sure enough it was still grinding, which meant they still had hope.

“Stalker!” the shout came from behind him, and he turned to see Wet Suit jogging up, both hands holding MP5’s. “Let me give you some cover fire. Give the signal to the guys across the way, and we’ll catch them in crossfire. Someone’s got to get access to the Command Center.”

“Agreed.” Stalker looked over to the other group, which was now joined by the Rotor Viper, who had hung back to reload. Now he was up on the front lines, his AK-47 spurting lead at men who had been his teammates just weeks before. Lieutenant Falcon was now the Squad Leader, but Stalker didn’t think he’s mind the Ranger taking over. In the Joes, experience often meant more than rank, and Stalker had that in spades. Besides, over the past few years, Stalker’s rank had been pushed up some, and even though he still wasn’t quite a Lieutenant, there was no reason why he couldn’t be acting squad leader. He scooped a clip from his web belt and reloaded his M-16. Someone had to get access. That someone was now him. He signaled over to Flint, Falcon and Ripcord, indicating the plan of action. They looked uncertain, but nodded agreement. Stalker pressed his eye to the starlight scope on his M-16, and cocked it, loading the bullets quickly into the magazine. Sporadic fire blasted from the six remaining Vipers, who stood buried in deep cover behind the walls. The Ranger glanced over to his two fallen buddies who were leaking significant amounts of bodily fluid onto the concrete floor.

“Ready?” Stalker asked Wet Suit and he nodded. “Go! Go! Go!” he shouted and the Joes moved in. Ripcord swung around his two teammates and peppered the Cobras with small arms fire, dropping one immediately. Flint and Falcon charged forward, ripping with their shotguns and sent another snake stumbling backwards. The other four shifted aim, drew a bead, but suddenly Wet Suit ran forward, his arms extended, MP5’s clutched tight in each fist. He snarled angrily as the weapons cut loose, bucking wildly in the loose grip of the Navy SEAL. Shell casings spun wildly through the air, raining down on him as he ran, pounding away with the silenced automatics. Another Viper was tossed from his stance like a rag doll and hit the back wall with a wet thump, then slid to the floor. Unfortunately, Wet Suit’s hands could not physically keep the weapons straight and the remaining bursts spewed all over the walls and ceiling of the hallway, but still accomplished their purpose, which was driving the Cobra troopers for cover. As they moved, the rest of the Joes moved in. Beachhead emptied a clip into a Viper, and ran forward, but a sudden impact threw him violently back. The bullet pounded him directly in the chest with the impact of a half a dozen jackhammers. His feet slipped and flew into the air as he was thrown roughly backwards, his back slamming into the hard, unforgiving floor. Claymore slipped around the Ranger as he dropped and let loose with his Uzi, sending yet another Viper tumbling to the floor. Stalker ran swiftly forward from his spot, not even paying attention to the last remaining Viper standing. The trooper unleashed a barrage of gunfire at him, but his focus was directed on one thing and one thing only: the door that was slowly sliding shut, cutting them off from the Command Center. The hallway wound around in almost a ninety degree angle, and Stalker could just barely see the doorway as the reinforced concrete barrier slid down, about four feet from the bottom. He heard a grunt and saw the last Viper fall, but the focus of his attention remained on the door. With expertly trained eyes, the Ranger scoped the whole door and area around it. He couldn’t possibly cover the distance to the door quickly enough to slide under, and even if he did, he’d be trapped alone in a room full of Cobras. But then he saw it. A small control panel set into the wall, just to the left of the doorway. He was about a hundred yards from it and had but seconds to take a shot, but all of a sudden, his mindset kicked in. A soldier’s mindset created and honed through decades of combat. Tweaked when you see a friend die, adjusted to make sure it doesn’t happen to you…it’s a state of being. Sports announcers call it being in the “zone”. Stalker wasn’t psyched about the terminology, but the meaning was accurate. His boots skidded along the smooth floor as he dropped and stopped, his rifle coming up into his shoulder. His body just stopped momentum when the scope pressed tightly to his right eye. Vaguely, he heard voices shouting at him, screaming for him, but his attention was focused on the control panel, which now filled the crosshairs in his starlight scope. He had no idea how far the door had slid shut, or if he was even in time, but he no longer cared, and just yanked back the trigger, his tight grip and firm shoulder keeping the large assault rifle trained on the small one foot square box. Sparks pounded from the rifle as he hit the trigger, trails of thin, almost invisible smoke spiraling after the numerous bullets now hurtling through the air. Similar sparks erupted from the control panel as Stalker emptied an entire clip into the section of wall, throwing small, harshly cut shreds of metal and wire sprinkling over the concrete ground. His eyes closed as he lowered the rifle, praying to himself, his heart racing. Finally, the mindset drifted away, and his senses worked in normal fashion again, and the first thing he heard…or didn’t hear, was the door sliding through its tracks. It had stopped. They did it. He had done it.

“—Said look the hell out!” was the next thing he heard before he felt a body slam into him, throwing him clumsily across the slick floor. A sudden flash of searing heat and the pungent smell of smoke attacked the Army Ranger’s senses and he noticed for the first time a small group of Cobra Incinerators escaping from the small slit between the bottom of the door and the floor. So in tune with his mission had Stalker been, he hadn’t noticed the group of Cobra flame-throwers bearing down on them from the Command Center. He’d have been burned to a crisp if he hadn’t been tackled by…

Stalker looked up at the mustached man who crouched above him, slamming a clip into his Uzi.

“Thanks, Claymore,” he said quietly as the mystery Joe jumped to his feet, his machine gun chattering. He stumbled to his feet as the lead Incinerator adjusted the aim of his flame-thrower. Orange death exploded from the large, round barrel, and Stalker dove out of the way, just as the whipping yellow tongues of flame skittered across the metal wall where he had been. The whole corridor now felt like a blast furnace, the flame and smoke filling the Joes’ lungs and punishing their bodies. Flint and Ripcord moved in, sliding smoothly around the rounded wall, and unloaded with their weapons, dropping two of the red and silver clad Cobra troops. Wet Suit had tossed aside the MP5’s and now clutched a nine-millimeter Glock in his hands, holding tightly as he returned fire. A tight grouping of shots blistered into the lead Incinerator’s red facemask, blasting chunks of silver helmet and red faceplate into the thick, smoky air. He stumbled and collapsed with a muffled grunt, and the last Incinerator thought better of continuing the fight. Turning to run, the Cobra did not get far as a short burst of fire exploded from Claymore’s Uzi and sent him hurtling forward. He smacked into the door, which was closed to all of about three feet, then slid down and hit the floor with a thud. It had felt like seconds, but the firefight had ended, at least for the moment, and silence settled into the hallway. Gun smoke and the thick, sticky smoke of the flame-throwers still hung in the air like a pea soup fog, and Stalker whipped his head around, making a mental count of his men and the casualties.

“Wet Suit, you and the Rotor Viper just got elected to be our new medics, understood?”

The Navy SEAL started to object, but decided against it. “Yes, sir.” He said, somewhat unsurely.

“You guys appropriate Muskrat’s med kit and see to those three right now.”

“Two, Stalker,” came a voice from behind him. Stalker turned and Beachhead limped forward.

“Vest stopped the slug…I’m a little sore, but far from needing medical attention.”

“You’re lucky we need all the guns we can get.” Stalker said, somewhat harshly. He crouched down and glanced under the thick, concrete door. A defensive position was being set up quickly, but haphazardly. He quick counted about six normal Vipers, and an assortment of specialty Vipers none of which were geared toward frontline combat. *Piece of cake*, he thought to himself, until he noticed the guy in the Crimson Guard tunic. He was big and bad and had metal arms, and he appeared to be directing the action.

“All right, boys,” Stalker said quickly, slamming another clip into his weapon. “We’ve got a new Cobra bigwig in there…big guy in the Siegie shirt. He’s the target, and then we smoke the radar, got it?”

“Yes, sir!” everyone replied. Even Falcon.

“Lieutenant Falcon, sir?” Stalker asked, looking at the camouflaged Green Beret. “Do those orders suit you?”

“Stalker, I think you’re more than capable of handling this. I defer squad leader to your discretion.”

 Stalker smiled as the other Joes loaded their weapons, determined looks on their faces. The little crew looked the worse for wear, injured, bruised faces, smears of blood, minor scrapes. But they were the dirtiest, the nastiest, and the best.

“Then let’s go!” Stalker waved his hand and they ran forward, towards the door, and towards a solid step to completing the mission.

THE END

To Be Continued in Book Three: Belly of the Beast