**THE PRICE OF PEACE**

**Book Three**

**Final Conflict**

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.

Acting quickly, the G.I. Joe team amasses a force and makes the decision to bring the battle to Cobra. Gathering up all of the operatives they can, new and old, the world’s foremost anti terrorist special missions force gets ready to fight the battle of their very lives. Surging towards Cobra Island, the G.I. Joe team must balance the needs of the world with a desire for personal vendetta. Completely abandoned by the political machine, they are truly on their own, and must do anything to survive.

For perhaps the final time, G.I. Joe and Cobra come head to head in the most vicious battle in the history of the two sides, and not all will survive!

G.I. Joe moves in to engage, and they prepare for *The Final Conflict*!

# CHAPTER ONE

**Out of Time**

Cobra Commander leaned back in the ornate, red velvet throne as the persistent ruckus chatter of small arms fire grew nearer and louder. His eyes twitched and darted under the deep blue hood, following the hectic motion and wild action going on just beyond the slowly sliding concrete barrier. Several Vipers lay across the smooth ground, none of them moving, and he thought that for the first time, he had actually caught a glimpse of one of the attackers. They were drawing closer…moving in.

“Commander, the Incinerators are ready to advance,” said Snakebite calmly, a small group of four of the Cobra flame-throwers standing at rigid attention behind him. “And I think it is time you retreated to a safer location, my lord.”

Cobra Commander turned to face his security chief and personal bodyguard. High pitched squeals and whines of ricocheting bullets tore through the large, cavernous, command room. The door continued to ease toward the ground, and had now only left about four or five feet of view underneath.

“Very well,” The Commander said with a hiss. “The view was getting terrible anyway.” He gestured towards the door as it slid downward, leaving only the bottom halves of the soldiers visible, along with the men scattered along the floor. He slid from the throne, sighing softly as a resounding series of pounds shook the doorway. With a shudder the door halted its movement right as the Incinerators slid underneath, flame-throwers in tight grasp. The rush of flame, frantic shouts and barks of machine gun fire drowned out as the regal, hooded mastermind strode confidently towards a small indistinguishable panel on the wall of the large room. Followed closely by the two Crimson Guard Immortals, Cobra Commander touched a section of wall, which released a sliding secret door, then disappeared into the black void left in the wall. Snakebite walked over, hit another hidden switch and closed the door behind his leader. He walked back over towards the throne where a group of half a dozen Vipers kneeled down facing the door, their large rifles perched and ready to fire. The large, half metal man couldn’t help but gaze around the hustle and bustle of the Command Center, even now as attack was imminent. There were four Tele Vipers manning their respective control panels, monitoring everything from short wave communication to radar and security of the installation. They had never thought to post video cameras throughout the complex arteries of the underground fortress, something that Snakebite was now regretting. The officer’s quarters, training room, and motor pool had them, but they just hadn’t had the time to string them along the prison route or near the storage lockers. That mistake was now costing them dearly. A small cluster of Techno Vipers and Cyber Vipers did busy work near all the complicated components, making sure everything was in working order and registering as it should. They each had side arms strapped to their thighs, but were by no means crack shots. It was up to this small group of Vipers to stop these insurgents; well a small group of Vipers and him. He smiled broadly as he retrieved his pump action shotgun from the throne where he had left it. Outside the door Incinerators lay in crumpled heaps, and he could see the last one falling to the floor, sliding against the massive concrete door, which had been halted mere feet from its secure resting spot. Inside, Snakebite was happy about that; it had been a long few years, and the large robotic man had been yearning for some action. Now that it had appeared, he was finally getting his wish.

“Come to me, Joes,” he hissed with a thick metallic twang. He clenched his steel hand into a tight fist and pounded himself in his large, barrel shaped chest. The metal on metal clang echoed throughout the quiet command room, as his eyes narrowed to dark slits on his melted, scarred face.

Stalker dashed forward, the other men following close behind. The last Incinerator had slid to the ground, and all that stood between the Strike Team and their mission goal was six Vipers and a big brute with a shotgun. The guy had, for some reason, intimidated Stalker right off the bat, which was quite an accomplishment. The grizzled Army Ranger was rarely intimidated by anything, but for some reason, this man’s twisted, gnarled visage; his almost inhuman size and those cold, steel arms drilled deep into Stalker’s psyche. Not only that, but he must have known he was outgunned and outnumbered, but he stood there among the Vipers, no flak jacket, no cover. Just stood there in the open, his dark eyes piercing the cool, stale air underneath Cobra Island. Stalker planted his feet and slid slightly on the smooth floor, bending over at the waist. With one motion, he swiped a small gray smoke grenade from his web gear, thumbed the pin swiftly out and chucked it underarm through the gap between the floor and the reinforced concrete door. He regained his run, then planted himself back first against the door, his weapon held across his heaving chest. The frantic shout echoed from behind the door as Vipers scattered for cover, and the rest of the Strike Team joined Stalker, back first, ready to rush in. Claymore slammed himself against the door just to Stalker’s left, and Flint just to his right. The others scattered along the concrete barrier, crouching down, ready to pounce. The grenade detonated with a sharp *BLAM* reverberating through the enclosed area of the hallway and Command Center. Shrapnel blistered the concrete door the Joes were flattened against and blasts of smoke rolled underneath, wrapping around their legs like frightened children.

“Go!”

It was one word; one jerking motion of his hand, and everyone ducked under the door and charged the Command Center. Recondo was the first one under and in, moving swiftly through the thick, opaque cloud of smoke that rolled across the floor. His trained eyes quickly spotted a flailing shadow and his shotgun roared once, clacked with the sound of the pump being jacked back, then roared again and the shadow ceased its flailing. Falcon dropped to his knees and somersaulted under the door, the bitter taste of smoke filling his lungs instantly. He forced the discomfort from his body and spun up into a crouch, his shotgun blasting as well. Beachhead ended up just behind him and to his right, his assault rifle tearing a barrage of thin paths through the thick smog that lingered inside. Another Viper hunched over, then flew backwards and hit the floor in an awkward back somersault. Flint and Claymore rushed in as well, ending up side by side, each one letting loose with their weapons into the dark cloud that clung to every surface of the center. The slick walls and smooth floors suddenly had handholds and the smoke was not letting go, flooding the area with noxious fumes. Stalker and Ripcord were the two bringing up the rear, but hit the ground just seconds behind the others, rolling swiftly under the door and coming up into low crouches, firing into the cloud at the vague shapes contained within. The Command Center was instantly flooded; first by noise and smoke, then by soldiers, and now finally, flooded with the deafening clatter and roaring blasts of automatic gunfire, which shredded the billowing cloud of smoke like razors through whipped cream. Muffled shouts and grunts, accompanied by the thuds on the ground and the slight let off of return fire signaled the Joes’ quick and utter victory in one vicious, final assault.

“Clear!” shouted Stalker above the din, and lowered his weapon.

“Clear!” shouted Recondo.

“Clear!” Falcon remained in his crouch, his shotgun lifted and ready.

“Clear!” Ripcord was behind Stalker, with his large assault rifle planted in his shoulder and waving slightly back and forth.

“Clear!” Claymore and Flint shouted simultaneously, scanning the dark smoke, which was slowly filtering away, but did not see any movement.

“Clear!” Beachhead replied, crouch-walking slowly forward, his rifle trained on the smoke cloud as well.

“All right, boys, round up these prison—“ Stalker started to shout, but then the smoke parted in a rolling puff and a figure hurtled from it, shotgun firmly in hand.

Snakebite’s already twisted face was further twisted into a glare of hatred, rage, and just plain meanness as he plunged from the cloud of smoke, his pump action lifted at Stalker’s camouflaged chest. Stalker’s eyes widened as the world shifted into sudden slow motion as it often did in the heat of battle; a life and death situation. Smoke erupted from the barrel of the shotgun and seemed to ripple through the air, hanging on the tiny oxygen molecules in the air itself. Sparks skipped through the smoke, as if running hand in hand with the cloud from the barrel, moving with it over the small distance towards the Joe squad leader. Stalker dropped, his muscles feeling like molasses as he fell back and slightly to his right, the sparks and smoke and buckshot cutting through the air just as he dropped. He swore he could count the pellets and the individual sparks as they crawled by, but his heightened senses in the heat of battle were most likely playing tricks on him. As if by itself, Stalker’s modified M-16 with the starlight scope leaped up as he flailed to his right, the tiny orange licks of flame from the shotgun dancing across his back and shoulder. With a slow motion deep grunt Stalker’s right shoulder pounded into the metal floor and his lips pursed, sending small particles of spittle spinning through the air. He held the M-16 firmly in one hand, his arm straight like and arrow and he yanked back on the trigger as he hit the ground roughly, his lungs hacking on the smoke that still lingered in the air. With an angry bark, the rifle jerked, threatening to jump from the Army Ranger’s tightly clutching hand. Before the echo of the first shot had even died down, he pulled again and again, the weapon lurching each time. Sparks much like the shotgun’s roared from the barrel and spun through the air, desperately trying to catch the tail of the 5.56 millimeter rounds, but failing miserably. Miraculously Stalker managed to keep the powerful rifle directed at the large target in front of him, and just as Snakebite shifted his aim, the first shot blasted into him, striking right between the large silver Cobra emblem’s eyes. A puff of gray smoke burst from his chest and a single yellow spark streaked into the air as the large Cobra in the Crimson Guard tunic stumbled back, grunting. The second shot plowed into his chest again, a little to the left of the first shot and his shotgun flew from his hand as if by an invisible force. Stumbling, he tried to maintain his balance, to defy the force of the bullets, but the third shot negated his slight momentum. It drilled him in the chest again, striking him dead center, right in the sternum. It hit with a deep, muffled plunk, and his eyes opened wide, unbelieving. Finally he stumbled back more than he could compensate for, his back arching and his legs flailing. A loud *BANG* echoed throughout the Command Center as the large man slammed back first onto the smooth metal floor, then finally and certainly, laid still, a trio of thin wisps of smoke crawling towards the ceiling from his red chest.

“Now we’re clear!” Stalker shouted, lying in a slight heap on the floor, supported only by his right shoulder. His hand and arm throbbed with pain, his muscles straining under the force of the bucking weapon. Sweat poured from under his dark beret and ran down his forehead and face, his eyes solid and unmoving. Ripcord smirked through his still slightly swollen features and extended a hand, which the Ranger eagerly took, then lifted him to his feet.

“C’mon, old man, you can do it,” he said with a snicker.

Stalker put him down with a stern gaze. “And you’ll always be a green blood, Ripcord.” He smirked finally as well, but then turned serious. The other assorted Vipers all stood rigid at their posts as Recondo, Falcon and Claymore walked over to them, guns aiming straight at them. Flint and Beachhead had the other side covered. These Cobras looked like thinkers more than fighters, so Stalker wasn’t too worried. He lifted his head and shouted, so everyone could hear.

“Under the auspices of the United States Government, I am placing you all under arrest! Please lay down your weapons and surrender or we will be forced into further action!” He walked calmly over to the fallen Snakebite as the other Joes rounded up the prisoners and gathered them all together on the left side of the room, surrounding the radar screen. A single Tele Viper remained seated at the screen and did not move.

“Okay, Snake…weapon down, hands up,” Falcon ordered, jabbing his shotgun firmly into the Tele Viper’s side. The Tele Viper merely glanced up.

“Unlike the rest of these fools, I am devoted to the cause of Cobra,” he hissed, his face turning back to the radar. “I know what you’re here to do, and the only way you’re getting to the radar is over my dead body.”

“That can be arranged,” Claymore replied harshly, walking forward, his hand digging for his Ka-Bar.

“For the glory of Cobra!” the Tele Viper shouted, stood, and drew his pistol quite unexpectedly. Claymore dropped as the large handgun went off with a rapid series of sharp shots, which echoed throughout the cavernous Command Center. Falcon, Flint and Beachhead simultaneously drew their weapons and fired, ripping through the renegade Tele Viper like a barrage of BB’s through wet tissue paper. The Cobra Communications Officer thrashed and jerked, the bullets plowing through him and blasting away at the radar console behind him. He lurched to his left, struck the chair he had been sitting in, grunted, then flopped to the floor, a pool of deep crimson already collecting under his prone body.

“You all right, Claymore?” Falcon asked, looking down at the man on the ground.

“Just dandy,” Claymore growled, standing. “Feeling like a youngblood sucker, but no holes in me or anything.”

“Yeah, man, he roped you in, huh?” Beachhead said, chuckling.

“Drop it.” Claymore glared menacingly out of a pair of squinting eyes. The other groups of Cobras stood stock still during the exchange, not wanting to get involved for fear of their lives. They were devoted to the Cobra cause, but they wanted to live, and were certain that Cobra’s lawyers would have them free in no time.

“Everything under control here?” Ripcord asked as he strolled towards the men, Stalker still kneeling over Snakebite a on the other side of the room.

“Nothing to worry about kid,” Recondo said.

Stalker lowered his gaze from the miniature shootout and glared down at Snakebite, shaking his head. There were three ragged bullet holes in his uniform, but only shredded uniform and black burn marks, no blood. However, his chest was not moving, and he did not appear to be breathing. The Joe kneeled down and placed two bare fingers against the Cobra’s neck, checking for a pulse. He yanked the fingers away as soon as they touched, the flash beneath them cool and clammy; almost a disturbing feeling about it. Much cooler than it should have been were he alive. Snakebite’s eyes were wide and staring at the ceiling, no life visible in them, but no blood surrounding the body at all. His deeply scarred and torn face actually looked somewhat peaceful, and Stalker almost felt a little bit of remorse as he placed his fingers on the man's eyelids to press them closed.

They didn’t move.

“What the--?” Stalker said quickly, pulling his fingers back just as the Cobra’s pupils darted over, staring directly into his eyes.

“Better get a bigger gun, Joe,” he snarled, his hand shooting out and wrapping around Stalker’s neck. “Because I’m not DEAD YET!” The Joe choked as the vice grip hand lifted him straight off the ground as Snakebite picked himself up from the floor and stood. With a metallic grunt, he cocked his arm back and tossed the Joe effortlessly, sending him sprawling through the air, trying desperately to stop his progress. He twisted in mid air and struck the large, velvet throne, now bullet riddled and broken. The impact sent a vicious shock through his backbone as he struck the backrest harshly, his body twisting uncomfortably. His momentum carried the throne over backwards and they both landed in a crumpled heap on the floor, the oak throne breaking apart and its pieces scattering along the floor underneath the fallen Ranger.

“Look out!” Ripcord shouted as he heard the impact and spun, seeing Snakebite back up on his feet. He raised his rifle, but not before Snakebite armed himself as well. In the blink of an eye, two massive .50 caliber Desert Eagles just seemed to appear in the Cobra’s hands, twin holsters on his thighs moving slightly with the swift action.

“No prisoners,” the Cobra said, his burnt and melted face snarling. The pistols swiveled, his wrists interlocking to hold his aim straight. Rapid gunshots exploded from the large handguns as they thrashed in Snakebite’s metal hands, but his strength kept them honed on their targets. Shell casings arced high in the air as the shots rang out, large bore bullets whipping through the air. The Joes hit the ground, raising their weapons, but soon found that they were not even the targets. Off to their left, the small group of Cobras tried to scatter, but Snakebite was just too quick and had too good of an aim. The prisoner’s screams were drowned out by the loud shouts of the pistols, and even as their bodies jerked, shook and spasmed, Snakebite adjusted aim and dropped another one. Then it was over. The guns had roared for less than a minute until the clips were expended, and every would-be Cobra prisoner lay on the ground, not moving. It had been a swift, sudden, vicious massacre. The Joes hadn’t even had a chance to return fire. But now, too little, too late, they finally did. Claymore raised his Uzi first and blasted away, but Snakebite twisted and lifted his thick, steel arm. Sparks spattered across his arm and torso, but he only stepped back and did not fall. Shotguns roared and assault rifles opened fire, and the Cobra dropped to the ground, barely avoiding it. In an instant he was over to the broken throne and had Stalker firmly in hand.

“Drop the weapons!” he screamed, hefting the Ranger high above his head. The Joes had no choice.

“W—why?” asked Stalker in a wavering voice over the large red uniformed Cobra. Snakebite stared up from under his beret. His eyes glanced over to the fallen Cobra soldiers half a room away.

“No prisoners,” he hissed. “We don’t want the good Commander’s plan reveled, do we?”

“We already know the plan!” Stalker shouted, his strength slowly returning as adrenaline pumped powerfully through his veins.

“You think you do,” Snakebite chuckled. “Only he knows for sure.” He turned his attention back towards the Joes as he lowered the Ranger, and gripped his neck. “Drop the weapons and kick them over here!” he screamed. “I’ll pop his head like a zit!”

“D—don’t so it…” Stalker gasped, the air struggling in his tight lungs.

All eyes turned towards Flint, merely out of habit. He looked around, assessing the situation. “Do it,” he muttered, letting his own shotgun clatter to the ground.

“Fools,” Snakebite growled in his now too familiar twang. Stalker thrashed around in his grasp, trying desperately to free himself. Snakebite glared at the Joes across the room, his eyes focused and unmoving as they laid down their weapons. Stalker thrashed wildly, his hands beating at his chests and Snakebite’s arms, and then rested, breathing heavily as the large Cobra did not budge. His eyes moved from the Joes to Stalker and he grinned. Stalker grinned back and raised his right arm, Ka-Bar firmly in his grip, swiftly plucked from his web gear as he thrashed around. The Cobra’s eyes widened as the blade plunged downward in a tight arc and tore through the loose, clumpy flesh on the left side of Snakebite’s face.

“AGH!” the large man screamed and drew back, dropping the Ranger onto the hard floor. Dark liquid seeped through his metal fingertips which he pressed to him mangled flesh. “You DARE?” he screamed, his eyes wide and crazed. His hands dropped and he lunged, growling deep in his metal throat. Stalker backpedaled his mind searching, desperately thumbing through his mental index of Close Quarter Battle. He shifted, grabbed Snakebite’s cold arm, then spun, sending the Cobra stumbling through the air until he went skidding face first on the floor.

“Thank you, Lifeline!” Stalker shouted, thinking about the Aikido classes that the GI Joe Medic had taught; Aikido-the art of using your opponent’s momentum against them. If there was one thing that Snakebite had plenty of, it was momentum. The Cobra rolled quickly over the floor, and then sprang to his feet, still snarling. Stalker glanced over at the Joes, which were now gathered about twenty feet away from the radar console, which loomed about fifty feet behind Snakebite. Stalker clenched his fists and narrowed his vision as the large Cobra leaped again. Stalker jumped to the side, spun and swung around a swift, sweeping leg, clipping Snakebite in the ankles of his blue and red camouflage patterned pants. He shouted and stumbled again, sprawling to the floor. Snakebite slowly pulled himself to his feet and actually chuckled slightly. Stalker cocked his head.

“Very good, Joe. Textbook C.Q.B. But, when fighting against me, there is no textbook.” He flexed, the servos in his arm humming and whirring. His fists clenched together with a metallic cranking.

“You know Close Quarter Battle, Snake boy?” Stalker asked, backing up slightly. “You a military man?”

Snakebite lunged, Stalker shifted, but the Cobra changed tactics and intercepted the Joe with a sledgehammer like blow to the chest. The Ranger’s breath exploded from his puckered lips as he flew backwards and hit the floor, then somersaulted clumsily backwards and came to a rest some ten feet away. His chest burned with every breath and his left shoulder had picked a fine time to start flaring in pain again.

“We have to do something!” Ripcord shouted from thirty feet away, running over to the weapons.

“Hold back, kid!” Falcon shouted, his hand going up. “We’ve done our part…the radar is toast. This is Stalker’s fight. Besides, we don’t know what that guy’s made of, we don’t want small arms fire ricocheting all over the place with him right there.”

Ripcord frowned, but picked up a shotgun, which was the closest gun to them, anyway.

With a shout, Snakebite ran for the fallen Joe again, and Stalker just barely rolled out of the way as the Cobra went sprawling past him. The Ranger moved in instantly, and just as Snakebite turned, he cocked his arm back and blistered his face with a deadly elbow. The Cobra grunted and fell backwards, his nose splitting and deep red blood flowing from the broken flesh.

“Am I a military man?” Snakebite growled between deep breaths, trying to control his rage. “I was, Joe…but no more, thanks to you and your kind!” he moved forward and before Stalker knew it, had him in his grip, then spun and tossed him like a toy through the thin, empty air. The Joe’s stomach lurched as he spun haphazardly through the air, a good eight feet from the ground. He tumbled softly, end over end, then hit the ground a good twenty feet away, twisting and softening the blow by landing on his right shoulder and rolling. It did little to soften anything as it felt like his shoulder burst from its ball and socket before his spine pounded into the unforgiving floor. To add insult to injury he skidded on his backside another good meter or so before slowing to a halt. Snakebite strolled forward in no rush, his eyes boring deep into the Army Ranger, his mouth contorted into a rage-filled sneer.

“M—my kind?” Stalker asked in a ragged voice, his lip trembling and bleeding profusely.

“GI Joe…turned be down for instatement. Said I was…unstable!” he growled, eager to tell his tale to the Joe before ending his life.

“You? Unstable? I…I can’t imagine,” Stalker said jokingly, but only enraged Snakebite further. The Ranger felt himself lifted from the floor like a child. An iron fist plowed into his chest and he flew from his feet again, almost feeling the wet snap of ribs inside his body. He rolled to a stop several feet away, and groaned, trying to pick himself up on shaky arms.

“As if that wasn’t enough!” Snakebite was still shouting as he walked firmly forward, still glaring and sneering. “Then you did *this* to me!” he waved a hand over his warped, ruined facial features. He scooped up Stalker yet again and tossed him backward. The Ranger’s rapid progress was halted by the large radar console, which drove deep into his spine and threw him roughly to the ground, smacking his forehead on the floor.

“Cobra saved my life, Joe,” Snakebite growled, lifting Stalker from the floor and pounding him into the console. The complicated equipment and monitor screen were bullet riddled and sparks flew and scattered from the damage done. Sparks and smoke washed over Stalker as he felt his vertebrae cracked into the equipment yet again. His whole body screamed in pain as he held his weight up by shaky arms, blood mingling with sweat and coursing from his brow and over his twisted, beaten face. Snakebite moved in.

“We can’t just sit here!” Ripcord screamed, charging forward. He brought Falcon’s shotgun up into his shoulder and ran, trying to get in range of the large Cobra who had Stalker pinned. The other Joes agreed and followed the paratrooper, their weapons raised and at the ready.

“Die!” shouted the large Cobra and plunged forward, his eyes wild with rage. Stalker drew in a deep breath and lunged to one side, barely avoiding the impact. Snakebite’s large metal arms drove into the radar console, ripping huge, jagged tears through the metal. His hands and arms withdrew, exposed wires jumping and sparking, as he did so. With swift rage he spun and lashed out, finally gripping the elusive Army Ranger’s neck in his tight steel grasp. Stalker gasped and hacked as he felt his air leave his lungs, then his feet lifted from the floor, shaking back and forth, trying to get their balance on the thin air.

He drew Stalker in close, his breath hot and sour on the Joe’s skin. “Now, Joe…I will show you what it means to be scarred for life.”

Stalker felt the air leaving his lungs with nothing he could do about it.

“Ripcord, don’t!” shouted Beachhead as the Joe prepared to fire. He halted just in time as the two men spun around, leaving Stalker’s back to them and blocking Snakebite from their fire. The Cobra stood between Stalker and the radar, and held the Ranger high in the air, snarling at him. The paratrooper moved in closer, his eyes intent. Stalker glanced back and spotted him, then thrashed, his eyes widening, and his hand reaching out.

“G…G…G—“ he stammered, his fingers twitching. Ripcord looked curiously, not knowing what to do or what he wanted. Snakebite was focused purely on Stalker, and was unaware that anything existed outside of his small circle of personal space.

“G…!” Stalker shouted again, his eyes pleading. “G…GUN!” he finally screamed and Ripcord suddenly realized, and fought the urge to smack himself in the head. He took three broad steps, then cocked his arm back and shot it out, sending the shotgun flipping through the air, circling end over end. Stalker’s eyes followed the weapon as it descended in a slight arc and hurtled down towards him. His breath was fighting for its freedom, but struggling as his fingers desperately clenched in empty air. The shotgun sailed, spinning slightly, and finally dropped down towards the Ranger, his arm shooting out. Stalker closed his eyes as he closed his hand, not wanting to look in case he dropped it. The feeling of gun metal slapping against the cool flesh of his hand was the best feeling he had felt in a long, long time as his fingers closed tightly around the shotgun. Without even thinking, he whipped his arm down and around, pressing the barrel firmly into the large Cobra’s barrel chest. Snakebite glanced down as it suddenly dawned on Stalker that he hadn’t seen Ripcord pump it. He closed his eyes again, praying, begging for the shell to be chambered…then pulled the trigger, actually expecting it to click on empty. The exploding gunshot was loud and ferocious in-between the two men as smoke blasted up from the weapon. Stalker’s left shoulder screamed in agony from the wild kickback and the shotgun flew to the floor followed quickly by the man who fired it. Snakebite shouted angrily and flew back from the force of the blast, sparks still flying and smoke still rolling through the air. His massive back plowed into the console and bent awkwardly, his feet flying from the floor. Exposed wires jumped from the impact and spun through the air, dragging small trails of sparks from their ragged ends. Stalker rolled back as the wires hit the large, mostly metallic man with devastating results. Larger, brighter flames of light blasted into the air on contact, tearing through the Cobra Security Chief and drawing smoke from every joint and servo in his body. His legs thrashed wildly as miniature bolts of electricity seared over the surface of his flesh, tearing his clothes and burning his hair. A putrid stench of burning cloth, hair and other less pleasant things filtered through the enclosed air of the Command Center and finally after massive shaking and violent jerking, Snakebite lay still, small fires erupted all over the console and even on his clothing.

“Overload city,” Ripcord said quietly as he approached his fellow Joe.

“Thanks, kid,” Stalker gasped, as Ripcord helped him to his feet. His chest and ribs burned and blood streaked over his face. His right shoulder hung loose and his left shoulder once again began seeping blood.

“You look like crap,” Beachhead joked, walking over.

“Could be worse,” Stalker replied, using Ripcord for support.

“We did our job, boss, the radar is smoke,” Recondo said, approaching them.

“I knew you could do it,” the voice came from the entrance and the men spun, half expecting Cobra Commander himself to be walking through the door. Instead it was Wet Suit, with a blood covered, but well bandaged Duke using him for support. Duke smiled after he spoke.

“How you feeling, Top?” Stalker asked, walking over to Duke slowly.

“I feel better than you look, that’s for sure.” There was a ripple of laughter through the crowd, but it stopped quickly. Duke’s smile faded. “We have to let the boys on the outside know the radar's down. The signal’s supposed to be a Willy Pete star shell.”

“I don’t think we’ll be shooting white phosphorus through his roof,” Stalker said grimly, gesturing upward.

“Agreed. Only thing we can do is make it outside to tell them in person.”

“How do we do that?” Stalker asked.

“I can tell you.” The voice was from the Rotor Viper, who emerged from the entrance with Muskrat draped over one shoulder. The Joe swamp fighter still looked mostly unconscious, but was now bandaged at least.

“All right, kid,” Duke said. “You’ve proven yourself. Tell us what you got.”

“With all due respect, Duke?” Ripcord asked, walking forward.

“What is it?” Duke asked.

“Since we’re in here, don’t you think we should send a team to look for the weapon? They’ve got to have it in here somewhere.”

Duke smiled at the fire haired Joe. “Thinking like a leader, Ripcord. Smart idea. You volunteering?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. Rotor Viper?” Duke turned to the young man.

“Motor pool would be my best guess. There’s a mini underground airfield with a secret hatch to launch from. Only problem is, they’re restricted to helicopters or V.T.O.L. craft.”

“Is it near here?” Duke asked.

“Yeah. Through those doors, actually,” the Rotor Viper said, his finger jutting towards a set of doors in the wall about fifty feet away.

“Good. Ripcord, Beachhead and Flint, you men will—“

“Hold up, Duke,” Flint said. “I’m here solo. I’m not running every little mission you guys come up with. I’m here to get me a piece of Destro, and nothing else.”

Duke’s glare narrowed. “Wow, for a little while there I saw the Flint I remembered. Thanks for reminding me what an arrogant jerk you are now.”

Flint smirked. “Anytime, Duke.”

“Fine. Beachhead and Ripcord? Can you guys handle it solo?”

“No problem, Top,” Beachhead said, moving over towards the paratrooper.

“Good. Go to it, and then meet back here in the Command Center. We’ll be in to meet you shortly after we pass on our message. Everyone clear?”

“Yes, sir!” the unanimous voices replied heartily.

“Let’s do it!”

“YO JOE!”

A sharp, brisk, cold wind whipped through the air, close to the ground, assaulting the group of soldiers as if sent by Cobra itself. It whistled melodically, pounding over the soft ground and bringing with it small droplets of water; a storm in waiting. The men were gathered here on a peak of sorts, much like the one the three Joes had faced down four HISS tanks from mere hours before. But this peak was higher; it’s down slope a sharp angle, and travelling down a good distance before flattening out into a wide clearing. The Whale sat cockeyed, its turbines silent and the hold devoid of life, merely waiting for the proper time. There was a thick batch of trees here, a few meters from where the forest really started, but this little thicket served its purpose as the Joe team huddled behind it, using mere wood branches and thin leaves as a life-saving bunker. Gung Ho shivered and rubbed his arms.

Hawk lowered the binoculars from his eyes and turned to the Marine, shaking his head. “That’s what you get for wearing that vest and not much else.”

“I want those snakes to know it was a Marine who came stomping down on them!” he shouted, thumping his chest with a clenched fist, right against the large, proud Marine Corps tattoo emblazoned on his thick, muscled chest.

“Don’t worry, Hawk, not all Jarheads are that crazy,” the voice said lowly from behind the two men. Leatherneck approached, decked out in his forest camouflage and green cap. His mustached face was solemn despite the joke he had just told to lighten the mood. His trademark M-16/M203 grenade launcher combination swung from his shoulder by a leather strap. “Any word, sir?” the Marine asked.

“Not yet, Leatherneck. Low Light and Bullhorn should—“

“We’re back, sir.”

Hawk spun, his heart leaping in his chest. Low Light emerged first, his dark hair pressed down by his large round helmet. The elaborate visor was pointed upwards, away from his beard covered face, which was looking very serious. Bullhorn followed, his night vision goggles swaying from his neck.

“You’re going to give me a heart attack on of these days, troop,” Hawk said, trying to keep the edge from his voice.

“You would prefer I made more noise, sir? I didn’t think you wanted me to draw any fire.” His sarcasm was only visible by the tone of his voice; his face remained stern and steady.

“All right, Low Light. Give me a SitRep…tell me what’s going on.” Hawk pressed his hands to his hips and looked at his two look outs, his eyes focused.

“Well, it’s not good news, sir, but were you expecting anything else?” Bullhorn asked, shaking his head.

“This is what we’ve got,” Low Light started, cutting off the younger man. “Looks to be about a dozen or more HISS Tanks, all lined up, guarding the Citadel. The pattern is four in back, three in the middle and five in front. Those were the visible ones, I have no idea if there are any hidden or not.” Low Light crouched down and plucked a thin stick from the dirt floor of the edge of the jungle. He quickly sketched the Citadel in the dirt, and then marked down each row of HISS tanks. “The snakes were nice enough to provide twin halogen lamps here and here, perched on top of two heavily armed watch towers.” He made another series of marks, and then drew a thick line a ways to the left. “This is the airfield. It’s not much to look at, which means we should definitely take a look at it. If they have this much armament, they must be keeping it somewhere…my guess is underground.” He paused for a moment to let it all sink in. “I think the airfield is the place to look.”

“Agreed. Go on,” Hawk said, motioning to the night warfare expert.

“All right, there are six ASP emplacements, which I think will provide the least resistance. They should be easy to take out, and will have a hard time tracking us down if we move fast. Which is probably why there are scores of foot soldiers in machine gun nests and roaming the grounds all through here.” He marked it all down, the General’s eyes widening as he did. It certainly seemed pretty impenetrable. “To add to that, sir, there appears to be another storm front moving in. If we know this, then undoubtedly the head snake knows it too.”

“If he’s going to launch the weapon--,”

“--It will be soon.”

Hawk wiped his brow with the sleeve of his brown leather jacket and exhaled deeply. “We’re out of time,” he mumbled. “But not out of hope.” He stood and motioned to the Joes, and they all filed in close, eager to hear the game plan. They circled in tight to their fearless leader, eyes and ears wide open, waiting for the news.

“All right, men, the time has come,” he said sternly, but softly. “The clock has run down, and it is up to us to finish this and finish it quick. We do not know how, but we are fairly sure that Cobra Commander will be launching the weapon in a very short amount of time, which means we act, and we act now.” His eyes were stern, his features like they were etched from solid marble. “We have to go under the assumption that the inside team has failed in their mission. It is now our job to drive through the Cobra force, take out their radar coverage and call in the air strike. If we can’t find the weapon, then we’ll make sure nothing is left standing, understood?”

“Yes, sir!” was the enthusiastic, but muted reply.

“Everyone knows their positions, so load up and let’s do this!”

“Yo Joe!” the troops began to spread out to the two vehicles, preparing for the battle ahead. Gung Ho wandered up to the General, his face calm.

“You really think the Strike Team failed, sir?” he asked. It was a question he didn’t want to ask, and even less wanted the answer to, but he felt it necessary.

“If only I knew, Gung Ho. If only there was some kind of signal—“

A loud rumble tore through the heavens as if on cue. It was a loud thunder-like growl, but it was deeper, more forceful. Hawk could almost feel the very ground tremble slightly. Without warning, a sudden, bright flash of light burst on the top of the tall, ragged volcano reaching high up into the sky. It was a ways from where the Joes were standing, but it was clear, even from that distance when a large cloud of smoke spun up out of it and reached for its cloud brothers in the heavens.

“What the hey?” Gung Ho stammered, stepping back. “Is the dang volcano erupting?” he asked loudly, wondering what else could go wrong.

“I don’t think so,” Airtight replied, squinting up from under his green helmet. “Doesn’t sound ri—“

Another earth shattering roar almost knocked the Joes from their feet as a large, jagged object plowed into the soft ground, not twenty feet away. It hit with a resounding *CLANG,* smoke trailing from it, and even little specks of fire danced across its smooth surface. It slammed into the ground once, digging a deep, uneven trench, then actually bounced slightly, twisted and landed with a massive *THUD* one more time, teetering like a Frisbee, wrong side up. Dial Tone and Airtight leaped to their feet, each one eager to check out this mysterious object that fell from the sky. Smoke hung in the air, marking a slight arcing path from the volcano to here, where the strangely shaped object lay. Hawk picked himself up off the ground where he had dove after the strange thing collided with the ground. He walked up to the metallic round chunk of metal, which still teetered strangely, and even though it was only a piece, it stood almost as tall as the Joes that surrounded it. General Hawk approached it, seeing the smiles on the Joes for the first time, and then glared at the object, wondering what everyone was so happy about.

“Here’s your sign, General,” Dial Tone said, almost laughing with happiness. Hawk shook his head.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“C’mon over here, sir,” Dial Tone motioned, and then stepped away from where he had been looking. General Hawk approached it, and got a good decent view for the first time, a long, thin smile spreading across his face.

It was the broken, battered remains of one of the largest radar dishes he had ever seen.

# CHAPTER TWO

**The Turning Tides**

The corridor was plain and smooth, remarkably similar to the ones the Joes had seen before, yet more tame, more subdued somehow. Small bulbs dotted the smooth metal walls in an even, constant pattern, casting dim, but manageable light throughout the hallway, which almost seemed to drift downwards. With a low hiss, the door had eased shut behind the two Joes, leaving them alone in the too silent tomb of the narrow hall, leading down into the depths of Hades for all the two Joes knew. The hallway was only narrow when compared to the main hall these two men had traversed not an hour before. This stretch was actually about fifteen feet wide, a decent size, but thin compared to the cavernous artery that led directly to the heart of Cobra Central Command. The Rotor Viper, Mike, Ripcord had finally learned, had directed them down this way, towards the motor pool. With any luck, the main attack force was drawing fire near the front of the Citadel, and most, if not all of the troops would be redirected there. Theoretically, that would give Ripcord and Beachhead free reign in the motor pool to do what they want and search for the device they prayed was still closed inside. With amazing silence, especially on hard concrete floors, the two Joes shuffled down the hall, crouched low, assault rifles directed forwards, slowly waving back and forth with each carefully placed step. Ripcord was in the lead, his black helmet pulled tight over his dirty blonde hair, and his well trained blue eyes darting through every inch of the smooth hall. Beachhead pulled up the rear, always making sure that his weapon was directed in the opposite way whenever Ripcord moved his. He still wore his green knit facemask pulled tight over his head, the only part visible his stern, nasty, cold eyes. They were well-trained eyes, like Ripcord…honed and perfected over the years to spot and assess a situation at a moment’s notice, even under heavy, dangerous fire. Beachhead ran a hand over his black flak jacket that was pulled tightly over his broad chest, his fingers playing with the numerous small indentations in the Kevlar. He could feel the cold steel of a bullet lodged in one of the upper layers and forced himself not to shudder. *Thank heaven for small caliber*, he thought to himself, brushing off the jacket as if to release his pent up anticipation.

“What do we got, Ripcord?” Beachhead asked, looking throughout the hall.

“Lots of nothing, Beach…hold up, though,” he whispered, lifting his hand. Some meters ahead, a small metal door was embedded in the wall. It had no declaration, no sign or anything, but Ripcord was sure it wasn’t the motor pool. “We have a door up here on the right. Should we check it out?” he asked, glancing back at the veteran Army Ranger.

“Yeah. There may be goons hiding in there. We don’t want to be the middle of a snake sandwich when the heat comes down.”

“I hear you,” Ripcord answered in the same hushed tones. He lifted the large automatic to his shoulder, lowered himself slightly again and resumed his careful, silent shuffling. The hallway was silent once again, an eerie, dead silence, made even stranger by the fact that the Joes knew there was a war most likely going on not half a mile away. Yet the building didn’t shake, the earth didn’t tremble…it was all scarily, silently still. Ripcord figured it had something to do with them being underground. The deep, muffled silence and the stillness caused by the tomb-like coffin of earth, dirt and soil all around them. With a deep breath, he desperately tried to muffle the sudden onslaught of claustrophobia, and did so with moderate success. Still, he would have much rather been plummeting through wide, open air than stuck under the earth any day of the week. He imagined that was why he chose HALO as his specialty. High Altitude Low Opening jumps were the most exhilarating, the most freeing experience he ever had. Plunging through the heavens, through the cloud cover, his face in the wind and his cloth uniform whipping about him. At this point, he was sure he would pay handsomely for some airtime right now. With sudden clarity, he remembered one of the best jumps he’d ever had…over this very island, what seemed like an eternity ago. He was a copilot in Ace’s Skystriker and punched out over the island against specific orders. How Hawk and “Iron Butt” Austin had gotten that smoothed over with the Pentagon brass, Ripcord would never know. All he did know was that the air had had a crisp, clean smell that night. An invigorating aroma that washed over him as he spun down towards the island. For some reason, that night, everything meshed together, and everything was going right. Until he’d landed. Then there was Zartan…the bow and arrow…and every—

*SNAP!*

The sound tore Ripcord from his almost dream state with a violent rush of adrenaline. It was a sharp, harsh crack, too low to be a gunshot, but a familiar sound nonetheless. The snap was followed by a swift, low shriek, echoing fiercely in the tiny confines of the hallway. Ripcord spun swiftly, looking to where the sound had come from, behind them. Beachhead heard it as well, and dropped, feinting to his left, but he was a little too slow. A silver streak sliced briskly through the stale, recycled air, and even as the Army Ranger rolled aside, it blasted into the side of his head with a bone-chilling thunk and tear. Impossibly, the silver blur continued, unhindered, as if it had hit nothing at all, a wide, arcing, dark trail of blood spinning through the air on its tail. Beachhead grunted and slumped to the ground, his facemask ripping away and scattering over the floor, small green shreds of cloth raining through the hall.

“Beachhead!” Ripcord shouted, lunging towards his comrade. A loud, metallic *THWACK* clanged off the wall behind him, where the hallway took a sharp left turn. Ripcord halted his run, skidding slightly and looked back at the wall. A long, thin sliver shaft was embedded into the metal wall, quivering slightly.

 An arrow.

Ripcord’s eyes went wide as he dropped into a crouch, his weapon raised at the back of the hall where the deadly projectile had come from. With clenched teeth, he pulled off one of his black gloves and pressed two fingers to Beachhead’s throat, almost not wanting to feel the nothingness. But there was a pulse, strong and steady. The shot had grazed his temple…grazed deep, but grazed just the same. He was out of the fight, but was far from seriously injured. His mask had fallen away from his face and his eyes were clenched tightly shut, his mouth twisted into a permanent sneer. Satisfied that his friend was okay, the paratrooper stood, cramming the butt of his rifle deep into his shoulder. The snap and shriek…a whizzing whisper…the arrow. At first, he almost thought it was a flashback to his drop on Cobra Island many years ago, but was now convinced he was lodged in the present cold reality. His buddy’s blood smeared across the floor and an invisible hunter closing in on him with a deadly weapon and even deadlier aim. He spun around frantically, keeping his legs bolted, his eyes scanning for any sign of disturbance in the hall. The hunter could indeed make himself invisible, but the bow…that, he could not hide.

*So where is he?* Ripcord thought to himself. He was unnaturally unsteady. He was a well-trained soldier with an assault rifle facing one man with a bow and arrow. Certainly he had the advantage. Of course, he had thought that years before, when he first met this mystery man, and he had lost that battle badly. Ripcord’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the hallway. With careful determination, Ripcord dropped one hand from where with gripped the body of the machine gun and guided it slowly towards a large leather holster attached to his web belt on his left hip. He didn’t like having cover in only one direction, so he swiftly unsnapped the holster and groped inside; trying to grab a hold of the Colt semi automatic pistol he kept inside. He was facing the back of the hall where the arrow had come from, and his weapon pointed that direction as well, ensuring that he would not be taken by surprise. But then, a low chuckle coasted through the air. An almost silent grate, satisfied and pleased. Ripcord imagined that if a lion could laugh, that was the sound it would make as it leapt to take down the hapless antelope it had been prowling after. With a sudden, swift blur, the Joe spun around, the pistol firmly in hand, just as the snap and whiz erupted from the *other* side of the hall. Impossibly, the hunter had gotten behind him yet again. Ripcord shuffled to his right as he spun, and his arm jerked as the swift silver blur slammed into his assault rifle as it was being brought around. The weapon jumped and spun to the hard floor, throwing the projectile into a hapless spin until it clattered against the far wall. Ripcord’s eyes narrowed at the weapon’s owner, who was now fully visible against the wall where it turned left towards the motor pool. Before the paratrooper could even form half a thought, his pistol roared to life, gray smoke and sharp yellow sparks pounding from the round barrel. The small semi kicked violently in his hand, but he held it firm and blasted off half a dozen shots in the span of seconds. Zartan weaved to his right as the first round struck the compound bow he held firm and splintered it into pieces too many to count. His hand shot open as the weapon broke apart and showered him with wood and fiberglass shards. Ripcord couldn’t honestly tell if the Cobra was angered or laughing at the Joe’s defiance, but he was on the defensive anyway, which suited the Joe just fine. The next grouping of shots slammed and drilled into the metal wall behind the shape shifter, sending sparks flying and ricocheting bullets whizzing throughout the confines of the hall. Zartan mysteriously began to fade from view even as he drew an automatic machine pistol from the leather strap that was strung over his shoulder. He lifted his hands and hauled back on the trigger, spraying the entire hall with a barrage of deadly gunfire, sending Ripcord sprawling. With a grunt, he hit the floor, his pistol leaping from his hand and smacking onto the concrete floor, only inches away. Rapid bullets peppered the floor, and the paratrooper shot to his feet and dashed towards the right hand wall, suddenly remembering the doorway perched there. He cast an uncomfortable glance back at Beachhead as he lunged forward, the automatic roaring in his ears.

*Zartan wants me…he’s toying with me. He doesn’t want Beachhead.* Ripcord tried to rationalize leaving his comrade, but was having a hard time of it. Still, he wasn’t going to do his buddy any good by dying, so with a final leap he threw himself into the air, sparks dancing along under his feet, throwing small chunks of concrete into the air. His right shoulder smashed into the metal door even as his hand frantically slapped at the wall just to the door’s left, desperately groping for an “open” switch. The HALO jumper dropped his head as small arms fire bounced off of the metal door just above his head, showering him with fragments and right sparks. He hauled his arm back and pounded one last time as Zartan scowled, angrily ejecting his spent clip and reaching for another.

“There’s nowhere to run, Joe!” he screamed as he closed his fingers around another clip jammed in his belt.

“I’m not such easy pickings when there’s no trees to hide in!” he shouted, his heart jumping a beat as the metal door slipped open easily. Ripcord smiled broadly and threw himself into the newfound room, then spun around. Zartan was running towards the door, fumbling with the clip as Ripcord pounded another large button on his side of the door. With a whisper, the thick, metal door slid firmly closed and slammed lightly against the concrete floor. He heard the shape shifter crash into the door on the other side and curse loudly, pounding against it. With hardly a thought, Ripcord scanned the keypad on the inside and with a single quick button press, the door was locked from the inside. His heart raced, and sweat brimmed to the surface of his forehead, then slowly began trickling down over his brow and down his facial features, which were still a little puffy and pink from the beaten Zartan had already given him. With a sigh, he planted his hand on the wall and lowered his head, his breath coming in harsh gasps, keeping in time with the rapid thumping of his heart. He turned, and stiffened as he saw the Viper lunging at him, his rifle lifted up above his head. The butt swung swiftly down, and Ripcord stepped back, waiting for oblivion.

“Talk to me, Dial Tone,” General Hawk said sternly and impatiently, glaring down at the communications officer. The mustached man with the beret was fumbling with a small, dark box, a thin, round radar dish firmly attached to the top.

“I think I’ve got it, sir,” he said, plucking the receiver from the small metal square pack. Hawk extended his hand and clutched an eager fist around the phone as Dial Tone punched in the coordinates. He was only greeted with static.

“What’s the problem, troop?” Hawk asked, trying not to sound too stern.

“I don’t know, sir. The skies have cleared up here, I don’t know what could be causing the disturbance.”

“I think I can tell you,” a voice said softly from behind the men. They turned as Airtight approached them. “I did some atmospheric tests…there is a major, and I underline major storm front moving in. It must have piggy backed off of the other one.”

“Must be coming in from the northwest,” Dial Tone said. “It would be in perfect position to degrade our communications.”

“Wonderful,” Hawk said sarcastically, when the radio suddenly popped to life.

“This is the Flagg to the assault team…status, assault team…” it was flooded with static, but was audible. Hawk smiled broadly.

“Flagg! This is Assault Team Alpha…get me the Admiral on the horn now, troop!” he shouted. The radio crackled uncertainly for a few seconds.

“General, I’m here. What’s the SitRep?” The static background almost completely washed away the Admiral’s voice, but Hawk could barely make it out.

“The early warning system is down, Keel Haul! Air strike is a go…I repeat, air strike is a go!”

White noise rippled from the receiver for a second, then Keel Haul’s voice barely squeaked through. “Negative, General! We are under heavy winds and a torrential downpour…launching would be impossible—“ static interrupted the rest of the voice, but Hawk had gotten the gist of it.

“Please, Admiral! You must reconsider…there are millions of lives at stake—“ Hawk was almost pleading. An unfamiliar sight to his troops, but understandable, nonetheless.

“General, if I launch these birds, there will be five dead pilots as well as those millions! Besides, this storm is heading your way…target tracking would be impossible at best…”

“Admiral! We’ve got spotters…please trust me on this. We’re almost there!” The General’s eyes were wide with disbelief. As was the going luck with this whole mission so far, as soon as they were on the brink of success, reality threw a cold bucket of water on their plans. Now, the cold bucket of water was a blinding gulf-storm.

General Hawk glared down at the radio, which was only spitting static and white noise. No more sound was audible. He hung his head briefly.

“We’ve lost contact, General,” Dial Tone said grimly. “Do you think he heard?”

“I don’t know, troop,” Hawk said quietly, slowly rising to his feet. His face was solemn, but his voice firm. “Dial Tone, Airtight, gather everyone around. We’ve got to establish a plan of attack ASAP.”

“Sir!” the two men shouted and dashed off to round up the others.

Destro placed a black-gloved hand over his eyes, which were covered by the thick beryllium. The flash had just subsided and a low rumble rolled over the valley where he and the others were stationed. It had come from the top of the volcano.

“What was it, Destro?” The Baroness asked from her pilot’s seat in the HISS.

“Thunder and lightning…no more, my dear. There is a storm moving in, after all.” He spoke in an even voice, his speech being transferred into the cockpit via an internal radio in his helmet.

“Perhaps. Shall we send someone to investigate anyway?” her voice was thin and devoid of emotion.

“No. There is no need to spread us even more thin than we already are.”

“Is that resentment in your voice, dear Destro?” The Baroness asked sarcastically. Destro had been vocally opposed to sending the bulk of their troops to the Amazon quite so soon, but had conceded. He now wished he hadn’t. The trick was now on them, it would seem. The original plan had been brilliant, Destro did admit that. Call everyone’s attention to Cobra Island, where a massive assault would be staged, only to have the bulk of the Cobra force in a hidden bunker on the Amazon River basin. The U.S. would get its measure of revenge, and the book would be closed temporarily on Cobra, allowing them to strike with SuperFreak at will. But all was not lost, Destro decided. He still had a decent squad of HISS tanks, troops, and a few Ferrets. His crack team set up in the front of the Citadel could easily hold of any Joes that were left from the ASP assault and the Eel squad. No, things were most definitely far from lost.

Hawk stood proudly before his men on a small ledge overlooking the sharp downgrade that ran into the valley below. They stood a good distance away from the edge to avoid being spotted by the troops assembled below.

“Gentlemen, here is the situation,” he said softly, but firmly. “As it stands, there is a good chance that the air strike may not be an option.” He spoke plainly, trying to avoid panic, but the anxious glances through the crowd showed that he had been a little less than successful. “However, we must proceed as if it is. If there is even the slightest chance that the air strike will be coming, we need to be prepared.” He paced slowly, pointing out each option as he spoke. “There is another storm moving in…most likely bigger and more violent than the last. If the strike is to proceed as planned, we need to give them something to shoot at.” The point was obvious, but he felt it was lost on a bulk of his troopers. “Under the thick storm clouds and rainfall, they will need infrared beacons…spotters if you will, to show them where to fire if they want to be assured of hitting their targets.” His face turned suddenly grim and serious, as he looked out at the faces of his troops, all intent and listening. Each one at this point must have known what was about to be asked, but none of them faltered. None of them balked. “I need one man to go deep into enemy territory and plant these.” He unslung a leather pouch from his shoulder and held it out. It was stuffed deep with magnetic infrared emitters. Small transmitters that emitted a very specific infrared signature that bombs and missiles could lock onto in the event of low visibility. “This is a dangerous…no, more like suicidal mission. But I need someone to step forward. I will not order anyone to do it, there must be a volunt—“

“I’ll do it,” the voice came suddenly and Hawk turned. Bullhorn walked from the crowd and stood next to the RAM Motorcycle, which sat on its kickstand. His shoulder was hung low at his side, but he made no motion of pain or injury. “I’ve gotten a lot of practice with this thing in the past twelve hours, sir. It should be me.” He patted the seat of the green motorcycle and nodded firmly.

“Are you sure, troop?” Hawk asked, and approached the younger man.

“Yes, si—“

“General Hawk?” Another voice came from the crowd and Hawk turned again, cocking his head.

“Yes, Hit & Run?” Hawk asked, looking at the light infantry trooper who walked calmly from the crowd.

“Please, sir…let me do it.”

Hawk looked at him questioningly.

“Bullhorn has a family at home, sir…people waiting for him. I…well, I don’t sir. I have no family. Please, sir…let me.” Hit & Run spoke with dramatic certainty and a calm assuredness. “Besides, sir…my test scores in the bike simulator are a hell of a lot better than his,” he couldn’t help but grin just slightly as he said it. Bullhorn returned the smirk and nodded slightly.

Hawk noticed the exchange with enormous pride. They were two of his youngest men…two of the somewhat later recruits, but showed maturity and determination well beyond their years.

“Hit & Run,” he said softly, holding out the leather pouch. “Thank you, son.” He saluted swiftly and briskly, his arm coming to a crisp, solid jerk.

“Sir.” Hit & Run replied back, his own hand and arm repeating the motion. He bent over and grabbed the large duffel bag that he carried with him, and then slung it over his shoulder. He tossed the pouch over his other shoulder and strapped the AR-15 to his harness that criss-crossed his camouflage chest. With silent resolve, the Joe strode over to the Ram, stopping briefly to salute Bullhorn, who returned it. The man in green lifted his leg, then shoved it roughly out, striking the bulky Gatling gun attached to the side of the bike. It popped loose and dropped to the muddy ground as Hit & Run swung his leg over the dark seat. With one swift motion he pounded his leg down and wrenched back on the throttle, roaring the bike to shuddering life. The engine dipped slightly, then roared, gunned and lowered to a constant, deep rumble, the Joe sitting on it as if he was born there. Suddenly the bike lurched forward, the front wheel flying into the air in an almost vertical wheelie. The back tire dug deep into the soft ground, and then sprayed a wide arc of thick mud out from behind the cycle. With a jerk, the tire finally caught on the soft ground and the RAM hurtled forward into the darkness, down into the nest of Cobras.

“Good luck, troop,” General Hawk said deadly seriously and snapped off another salute, honestly wondering if he’d ever see the young man again.

Zartan stomped angrily towards the metal door, the thin plastic keycard clutched firmly in hand. He scowled as he realized that he had wasted fifteen precious minutes tracking down the blasted card, and the Joe could pretty much be hiding anywhere behind the door. It led to the Viper quarters, or one of many, anyway. There was a short hallway, which led to a medium sized room with scattered bunks and a bathroom on the far wall. It was good enough for the Vipers…it met their needs, but wasn’t extravagant. He glanced down at the Joe who was still unconscious on the floor. The shape shifter sneered as he stepped over his prone body, and almost considered finishing him off right then and there. But he really didn’t want to give the other one a chance to get good and hidden. What was his name? Oh yeah, *Ripcord. You and me are far from finished, Joe. It’s time I ended this little chapter.* A slight smile turned up the corners of his thin mouth as he whipped out the thin plastic card and swiped it quickly through the reader on the right side of the door. He’d had to ask four different motor pool jockeys before he finally found one who resided in this room. For some reason, Snakebite wasn’t answering his radio. Although, if the Joes were down this far, Zartan had a feeling Snakebite wouldn’t be answering any radios ever again. *Suits me,* he thought with a frown. *That guy was too spooky for my tastes.* With a quiet whoosh, the metal door slid quickly up into its recess in the frame and the Cobra master of disguise was immediately disgusted. A single Viper lay on the floor in the hallway. His assault rifle was cast onto the floor carelessly, and he lay propped up against the wall, his head resting on a padded shoulder. One padded arm was slung over his stomach and he coughed slightly as Zartan walked by.

“Where is he, fool?” Zartan demanded of the fallen Cobra Trooper who lifted his head slightly.

“Unnh…I think I hit him…” the voice rasped underneath the thick, silver plated helmet. “He’s in there,” he said, pointing a shaky finger towards medium sized square room, which branched off the hallway. Zartan frowned angrily. It was so hard to find good help. The Dreadnoks were living examples of that. He grinned as he lifted off the brand new bow and arrow from his shoulder. He’d had a spare in the motor pool locker room, seeing as how he expected to be knee deep in Joes. He wrapped his steel fist around the grip, and slowly slipped silver, straight arrow from the small quiver built into the heavy compound bow. With a swift flip of the wrist, he notched the arrow cleanly on the thick, taught string of the bow, then slowly pulled back, his muscles tensing with the resistance. The resistance quickly faded and the string pulled smoothly back until it was back all the way, the arrow pointed at the floor. Zartan’s eyes scanned the area as he left the hallway and entered the square room, with four sets of bunks on each side. The room seemed large and empty, with no one inside, and no movement from where he stood all the way back to the bathroom. With a twist of his head, Zartan got ready to call back to the Viper, when a sudden movement flashed in the corner of his eye. His feet shuffled quickly, then set and he spun quickly around, bringing the bow up into firing position. The movement now had a pattern and color…it was a figure in camouflage, stumbling to his feet, blood streaming down over his head and face. A dark black helmet was pulled down over his head, but the wound was apparently below it, almost directly between the eyes, and it was bleeding profusely. The Joe stumbled again, but managed to stand, using the wall just next to the bathroom door on the far side for support. Two fingers twitched anxiously on the tight string of the bow, then closed firmly around the feathered shaft as the cowled man squinted at his target. With a final, deadly realization, the paratrooper noticed the large man standing meters away, the primitive, but more than effective, weapon clutched and aimed right at him.

“No! P…please!” the Joe stammered, throwing his hands up. “I’m n---“

“Shut up,” Zartan hissed and released, his stern glare melting into satisfied, if somewhat pent up glee. The string whipped straight with a sharp *SNAP* and the silver metal arrow streaked through the air like a finally honed sword through a soft pillow. It shrieked like a spoiled child, the piercing shattering noise downright disturbing in the small, stale room. The man in camouflage jerked one way uncertainly, then lunged the other…but stopped dead when the silver streak drilled deep into his chest. It struck the sternum with a dull thunk, but didn’t stop there. The force of the shot slammed the Joe back first into the wall, his face contorted with pain. The black helmet flew from his head, and his dark black tussled hair swayed over his shocked and confused eyes. He gurgled incoherently, looking down at the silver shaft buried in his chest. It was embedded up to the feathers, and the target couldn’t help but feel the strange tickle of the feathers against his flesh. He tried to speak, but could not, and his head plopped downward as he hung there, pinned to the metal wall by the long, silver shaft.

“Just like a butterfly,” Zartan whispered, striding confidently forward. A red stain had spread along the wall in back of what was now a corpse and slowly drooled down the smooth surface. It was a beautiful sight, Zartan was sure. Contorted, twisted and bloody, hanging on the wall like a trophy. The uniform torn and ragged, his face drooped down, looking at his own deadly wound. His hair tossed and unkempt, dark…

…and…dark? *Wait a minute—*Zartan’s thought barely processed before he swung around, his free hand clenched into a tight fist. But the “Viper” was already on top of him, lunging forward, his weapon cocked like a baseball bat. But now, the “Viper’s” helmet was off, and it wasn’t a Viper at all…it *was that Joe that blasted Joe--* Zartan sucked in a deep breath as the wooden butt of the large rifle swung around and plowed him in the gut, just below his clear chest plate. The bow spun from his loose grasp and he doubled over, gasping loudly, and Ripcord adjusted the grip of the weapon.

“Two of us can play the old disguise game!” he shouted, swinging the rifle back around, then down in a tight, swift arc. The wooden butt crashed into the back of the Cobra’s head with splintering force, breaking apart and sending wooden fragments and splintered shards spraying all over the two men. Zartan collapsed in a heap as Ripcord dropped the rifle, his arm numb from the contact.

“Too bad the Viper wasted all of his ammo before I took him down,” he snarled. “I’d have just as soon shot you in the back.” He turned, his face angry and tired.

“Not very hero-like of you, Joe,” the voice hissed from behind him. Ripcord couldn’t believe it. The Joe spun around as the shape shifter slowly pulled himself to his feet, almost growling with a combination of anger and pleasure at the young man’s obvious shock and disbelief.

“You’re conscious…how? No human being—“

“I’m surprised you haven’t learned this yet, boy!” Zartan screamed, storming forward, his head lowered and eyes flaring. “I’m a little more than *human!*” He wrapped his massive arms around the unsuspecting paratrooper and lifted then twisted, hurling the Joe around in a tight circle. Ripcord winced as his back pounded hard into the unforgiving wall that the mystery man had slammed him into. Zartan’s grip did not release, but merely shifted to the Joe’s collar, just above the dark flak jacket of the Viper uniform he wore. He cocked back a large fist, while maintaining his tight grip with the other, and then drove the fist forward in a vicious straight jab. Ripcord lunged to his right, the fist grazing by and drilling into the metal wall with bone shattering impact. Zartan swore and drew his twisted fist quickly back as Ripcord slipped from his grasp. As soon as the Joe was free he moved in quickly, striking with swift, numerous, calculated blows. In rapid succession, he slammed Zartan in the ribs with a quick right, then whipped his left around and plowed it into the shape shifter’s jaw. Then with equal quickness he pounded his face three more times with lightning quick jabs and crosses. The Cobra stumbled back under the furious assault, until his back struck the other wall behind him.

“You know, you took me out once, freak!” Ripcord shouted, lurching ahead. “But that was a long time ago! I’ve had years of practice taking down slime bags like you since then!” He threw his right leg around in a tight circle, drilling it into Zartan’s left kidney. He stumbled and gasped, but did not fall. But Ripcord did not take that for an answer. He moved into the Cobra’s range of motion and pounded his temple with two successive elbow strikes, hitting so hard that his elbow ached immediately after contact. Zartan stumbled again, and fell down to one knee, supporting himself with a shaky arm.

“I’ve got some payback to get, Zartan!” Ripcord screamed as he slammed another kick into the shape shifter. “Payback for Cobra Island, ten years ago!” He kicked him again, even harder. “Payback for one of your boyfriends taking out my Candy!” He dropped down slamming a fist in a sharp angle, which glanced off of Zartan’s head. The Cobra dropped to one elbow, his face bleeding freely, and his arms quaking. “Our little rivalry ends now!” He lifted his foot to send it crashing into the shape changer, but Zartan was swift and sudden, despite his suffering. He leapt to his feet, knocking away Ripcord’s attempted kick, then moved in and struck him with a thunderous punch to the chest, sending him sprawling.

“Feel better, Joe? Not for long!” Zartan nailed him with a left cross, then followed up with a right uppercut, spun and blistered him with a whipping back fist. Ripcord’s face opened back up, spraying blood in a wide arc throughout the room, spattering the walls and the floor. Zartan lunged, but Ripcord feinted and threw a straight punch into his chin, which made him stumble back, but he quickly regained his balance, spun around again and slammed the paratrooper in the side of the head with a powerful roundhouse kick. He followed the spin kick with a straight sidekick, then shuffled in and threw a swift left. The Joe ducked away from the left, and swatted his hand aside, then dove in and drove his knee deep into the Cobra’s ribcage, doubling him over. He planted his hands firmly on the man’s wide back, then shifted and flipped him over in a clumsy, uncontrolled somersault. Somehow Zartan turned it into a graceful, gymnastic flip and ended up on his feet and spun around to face his attacker. With a shout, he lunged forward, thrusting out his large, powerful leg, which Ripcord quickly slipped away from, luckily, because the harsh blow struck one of the bunks with enough force to split the support beam in half and knock a solid chunk of two by four out of the post. Zartan drew his leg back in and Ripcord lunged at him in a rough football tackle, slamming him into the broken post and smashing through it. Their momentum continued amidst a shower of splinters from the busted wooden bunk until they struck the next post, which was fastened securely to the metal wall with bolts. The shape changer’s back struck the immovable object and twisted, throwing both of them onto the bed. With a grunt, Zartan grabbed Ripcord’s collar again and yanked up fiercely, smashing his head into the wooden frame of the bed above. The Joe drew in a sharp breath and grimaced as Zartan pulled his knee in tight to his chest and thrust out, sending the paratrooper sprawling out back onto the floor. The Cobra followed close behind, sending the Joe reeling with powerful kicks to the stomach and chest, even as he merely tried to stand. Suddenly, Zartan’s large arms were around him again, almost impossibly powerful, and before he could do anything about it, the Joe was off his feet and hurtling sideways through the air. His back struck the same bed post and shattered the rest of the mangled wood with his impact, then struck the wall and actually bounced the other way, rolling onto the cold, hard floor among the wooden splinters. Every single bone and muscle in the Joe’s body screamed for painkillers. It was adrenaline alone keeping him moving, and even as he lay still, he could almost feel the pain synapses and nerve endings firing in their rage for what he was doing to them. His arm felt like a slab of mushy lead, and his legs seemed like they could do nothing but drag as the shape shifter strolled calmly forward, his bloodied face scowling, and his piercing white eyes glaring out from beneath black face paint and a thin coat of red. Ripcord rolled onto his stomach, trying to lift himself, but his muscles would simply not cooperate. The large, menacing, cowled figure loomed over the fallen Joe, hands firmly on his hips, his face stern and determined.

“It’s over, Joe. Your turn now, and then your friend in the hall.” He reached down and grasped the back of Ripcord’s jacket, lifting him, but the Joe HALO jumper wasn’t out of the fight yet. With a shocking quickness, the Joe leaped at Zartan, his hand clutched defiantly around what he landed upon when he was tossed to the wall like so much trash. It was the thick, solid chunk of two by four broken from the bedpost and he held it like it was a lifeline. He whipped his arm around in a tight, vicious arc, Zartan’s eyes growing wide with this last ditch act of rebelliousness. Ripcord’s hand flared with pain as the large block of wood cracked into the side of the shape changer’s cowled head with a rocking impact. Zartan shouted and reeled, stumbling clumsily, the energy and fight quite suddenly leaving his body. Ripcord charged forward and swung again, and again the shape shifter backpedaled uncontrollably, his arms flailing and his legs buckling. The Joe used this momentum and lurched forward again, this time lashing out with a fierce, arrow straight sidekick, which caught the Cobra directly in the chest plate. He whipped back and hit the ground with his back, and skidded a few feet before coming to a rest just outside the bathroom door. His narrow eyes glared at the Joe through a red haze as blood now coated his flesh and ran down over his body in wide rivers as well as narrow streams. Smears and drops trailed along the floor, leading to where he now sat, half laying, half sitting up, one hand pressed tightly to his flowing, now red mouth. With stiff gasps, his large chest rose and fell beneath the protective plate, which was cracked, and starred from one of the impacts, he had no idea which. Ripcord stumbled over to the Cobra master of disguise, trudging slowly, one foot plodding after the other, in short uneasy steps. Zartan laughed out loud, the coughed, tiny specks of red spraying from his lips. He put a hand to his cowl, which was torn and matted to his head with dark crimson.

“Are you going to brain me, Joe?” He asked, smirking. He lifted a hand up and clutched at the porcelain sink above his head, steadying himself. “G…going to smash my head in with that two by four as I lay here?”

Ripcord continued his determined walk forward, his eyes lowered and hard. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the impaled Viper in his uniform, suppressing a slight odd feeling of fatality…like being at his own funeral.

“I s…see that look in your eye, Joe. It’s not a very heroic look…” Zartan continued to sneer as his muscles tensed in his arm that clutched at the white sink above his head. Ripcord faltered a little, the two by four wavering ever so slightly in his grasp.

“What’s the matter, hmm?” Zartan sputtered, more blood bubbling to his lips. “Feeling uncertain? A little conscience, perhaps?” Zartan slowly pulled himself to his feet as Ripcord halted his forward progress. “Hmmm, having a conscience…I wonder what that feels like?” the words were barely out of Zartan’s mouth when he lunged forward, his face contorting and his mouth snarling, his arms reaching for the paratrooper. But Ripcord was ready. He stepped back, just slightly, raising the slab of wood high above his head. With a grunt he drove it downward…no arc, just a straight shot down at a sharp angle. It slammed into the top of the shape shifter’s skull with a blistering splinter, the two by four actually cracking and flaking apart under the contact. Zartan groaned and stumbled backwards towards the bathroom. He fell like a two hundred and fifty pound bag of rocks the back of his head pounding into the porcelain sink with a sharp *CLANG!* His eyes rolled, Ripcord could see this even with Zartan’s lack of pupils, and he slumped to the tile floor, and then laid still, a small, thick puddle of red collecting under his cowl, which was splayed out under him. Ripcord’s fists clenched around the wood as he stepped forward, glaring down at his foe. His muscles tensed as sweat mingled with blood rolled down his face and bare arms, over the pads and gloves of the Viper uniform he wore. His heart beat; pounded in his tense, tight chest, and his face twisted into an angry scowl. He rose the two by four over his head, staring blankly down at the prone body in front of him, lying on the tile floor. His breath jerked in quick, sudden gasps, as his muscles tensed, his arms shook, the broken two by four trembling, ready to strike.

“Ripcord! Don’t do it, buddy!” the shout came from behind him and shook him from his mindless, dazed rage. He lowered the weapon and spun, glaring at Beachhead as he walked slowly through the room, his hands waving in a smooth, calming motion. “Relax, pal…it’s over, man. He’s done.”

Ripcord’s breathing slowed a little, his chest resuming its normal rhythm. His arms still trembled, and the two by four dangled loosely from his outstretched fingers. Beachhead’s mask swayed loosely from his wet, dark stained head. His eyes were focused and alert, which was a good sign, and the dark mess on the side of his temple was already pretty much solidified into an infection-preventing scab. He had both rifles with him, one slung over each shoulder, and he patted the paratrooper gently.

“C’mon, buddy,” he said. “We’ve got a motor pool to check out.”

Ripcord smiled finally, letting the two by four clatter to the hard concrete floor. “You’re right, man. Sorry, kinda lost it there for a minute.”

“Happens to the best of us, Ripcord. But yeesh, you need to get a better tailor!” he laughed and gestured at the Viper uniform as the two men slipped out the open door and approached the motor pool.

# CHAPTER THREE

**Organized Chaos**

The dark night had swallowed him whole and he felt as if he was whipping down its dark, cool throat, rushing towards its churning belly, waiting to feed on him, chop away at him, and dissolve him in a thrashing, violent fury. He could hear no sounds save for the wind whipping in his helmet-covered ears, and felt nothing but the same wind beating him about his bare face and exposed forearms. His bright white eyes squinted in the darkness, adjusting to the lack of light, and trying to accommodate him as best as possible. Sudden jolts and ruts had made the journey thus far somewhat challenging, but it was far less than he had handled before. Far, far less than what he was about to jump into. The light infantryman was surprisingly calm and collected; he had surprised himself actually, when he volunteered for this mission, deemed by General Hawk himself as “suicidal”. Hit & Run was eager to please, eager to do his part for the better good, and was shocked to find that he wasn’t all that frightened. Just the fact that he was riding on the back of the RAM at breakneck speed towards the towering Cobra Citadel with no cover, no armor and no backup was a testament to his courage and defiance. Or his stupidity, the young camouflaged man was not sure which. With heavy thumps, the duffle bag slung over his shoulder whomped against his arched back with each bump and rut the RAM jostled over. He had shut off the lit readouts on the dashboard and had shut off the headlights themselves, trying to make this approach a covert as possible. The sooner they started firing at him, the better chance they had of hitting him. That was a chance Hit & Run was not willing to take. Suicidal, sure, but the longer he could last, the more spotters he could plant for the fighter jocks. *If they’re even coming.* His mind barked angrily. That part of the plan hadn’t really come to him yet. He could plant all the spotters he wanted, go down in a blaze of glory, but if the planes didn’t launch, it didn’t mean squat. He forced the negative energy from his mind as he mentally made a tally of the equipment in his duffle bag, which continued to bounce along his back like a hyperactive child. There were several grenades packed near the top of the bag for easy access; his grappling hook, of course, not that he imagined needing it where he was going. The rest of it was a parachute pack and other assorted goodies that had seemed essential at the time of packing, but now seemed like just so much dead weight. Swerving the bike sharply to the left to avoid what looked like a rather large rock in front of him, the young Joe passed a green colored hand over his right side until it slid over the leather pouch, bulging with the infrared spotters. He wanted to make sure he didn’t lose these, although if he did, maybe that would give him a reason to turn back. *No!* His overactive mind shouted, for the moment blocking out the whipping winds that roared past his head. He pushed negativity from his brain yet again and tensed as the RAM hopped over a jutting rock. With a low grunt, he let his legs slack for a moment, so they could buckle when he landed and reduce the stress on his knees. If he had to dump the RAM for any reason, he wanted to be sure he could run like heck when he did. The engine whined briefly as the bike became airborne for a split second, then coughed and roared again when it landed, bounding softly over the soil. After checking the pouch for its contents, the light infantryman ran his hand over his chest, relaxing when it touched the cold, safe steel of his best friend at the moment, the AR-15 he had carried religiously for a number of years now. There were dozens of clips strapped inside the duffel bag as well as a bunch in the harness he wore criss-crossing his green and black camouflaged chest. He squinted his eyes through the light red goggles that were pulled firmly over his face. The landscape ahead was littered with the headlights of the Cobra army, some arranged in an insanely well organized fashion, while others seemed to roam, just coasting along, looking for a target. Well, they were about to find it. All seemed in order, there was nothing left to do but ride and pray.

Destro glared out into the dark night, his ears perked and listening, although hearing nothing unusual. His muscles twitched anxiously and a thin bead of sweat slowly formed on his forehead, threatening to roll down over his face. The silence was all consuming, it seemed to swallow the very night whole, even as Destro sat there in the large double barreled gun turret of HISS One, staring off into the darkness. There had been that single flash of lightning…a low rumble of thunder…but nothing since, however the masked man could almost feel the moisture lingering in the air, ready to break loose.

“Sir?” came a low voice from down below. Destro turned and looked.

“Yes?” he asked, focusing his eyes on the small group of gray and red Eels that approached. They wore their full gear, minus the facemasks and flippers, and held automatic weapons instead of spear guns. There were five of them, the one in front doing the talking.

“We’ve swept the sewer system sir, but it’s clear.”

Destro squinted down at the lead Eel and cocked his head. “Who are you?” he asked simply.

“Eel Nine, sir,” he said strongly and proudly.

“Where is Eel One?” Destro asked. “I assigned him to your squad personally.”

Eel Nine looked somewhat uncertain, but replied quickly. “He was taken out, sir…in the ambush. Cobra Commander himself delegated the authority to me, sir.”

Destro sighed, exasperated. “Very well. You can do me this favor, Eel Nine. I need a reconnaissance team to get a lay out of our approach,” he said, motioning to the long, downward slope of the hill that ran into the valley. “I think we may need to place some roving guards there.”

“Sir? We’re Eels, sir. Isn’t that out of our element?” he asked.

“You were Vipers once, Nine. I’m sure you’ll adapt. Get to it!” he jabbed a finger towards the hill, already disliking Eel Nine immensely. Eel One had been the most capable Undertow under Destro’s command in the Iron Grenadiers. A simple ambush wouldn’t have taken him down. He scowled at the water troops as they ran off towards the hill at a quick jog, gray wet suits and all. Another low, deep rumble echoed throughout the valley. Destro looked to the sky and immediately saw the thunderclouds moving in. It was going to get very wet very soon.

Hit & Run half stood on the slender green bike as it hopped over the rocks and roots embedded in the soft ground. The motor continued its high pitch and deep rumble as it bounced into the air, then landed with a thump. Moonlight glared off of the Joe’s helmet, as he tore forward through the night, glad that even the slightest sliver of moon was now visible, making the ride at least a little more bearable. The man-produced lights up ahead were growing slightly larger and more in number as the light infantryman drew closer, the roar of the RAM’s engine now almost deafening to his adrenaline-heightened senses. *They must hear me by now!* His mind barked as he wrapped his right hand against the soothing metal of his machine gun.

“This is Flak Viper Forty-Seven to Sixty…respond Sixty,” the large, thick Viper mumbled into his small communications device. He sat in the ASP, which stood straight up, glancing out towards the large down slope that approached the valley.

“This is Sixty, Forty-Seven. Go ahead.”

Flak Viper Forty-Seven squinted through his thin black visor mounted in his dark green helmet, his face twisting with curiosity. He was in the lead ASP, closest to the base of the hill, with three more spread out to his right and two more scattered a little ways to his left. There was no reading on the radar in front of him, but a strange glob floated across the HUD built into his night vision helmet.

“I’ve got a possible contact here, Sixty. A heat source moving in at incredible speed. I can also hear an engine…just a single one, not too loud, but definitely there.”

There was a pause. “I’ve got nothing, Forty-Seven. Check your scanners.”

“Will do, Sixty,” he replied and glanced down to do some adjustments. The engine noise continued to grow in pitch and volume, but Flak Viper twisted one last dial, and then lifted his head to make the call. His breath sucked deep in his lungs and his eyes widened, as the engine noise was now a low roar, and hurtling right at him. *Nothing my ass!* His mind barked. *That’s a man and a motorcycle and what the heck is in his hand oh no it’s a gren—*“

Hit & Run lowered himself close to the bike, pinning the AR-15 between him and the seat with his elbow while he rifled through his thick duffel bag. The night zoomed past him as his speed grew to amazing proportions, the bike shaking even while roaring across smooth ground. He finally wrapped an eager hand around the small round object as the first ASP was now coming too swiftly into view. With a skillful twist of the thumb, the pin slid free and dropped, whipping backwards by the force of the winds surrounding the zooming motorcycle. With a lurch, the front tire struck a rock and sent the bike swerving just as Hit & Run saw a Flak Viper lift his head and glare out in shock and wonderment. The light infantryman leaned to his right as the RAM zipped within inches of the gun pod, close enough that the camouflaged Joe merely tossed the grenade through the open canopy as he zoomed past. The other ASPs were also pointing towards the hill, so he was clear of them, but immediately saw three machine gun nests strewn out about the ground some meters ahead. His engine was revving and screaming now, and he knew he’s been heard, as he could see the SAW Vipers scrambling for their M60’s desperately, with wide, shocked glares out from under smooth, round helmets. There was a sharp *BLAM* and sound of rending metal as the grenade detonated aggressively inside the Assault Systems Pod, tearing the canopy off and tossing it aside in a torn, jagged shred. Immediately, the two halogen search lamps spun around from monitoring the perimeter and honed in on him, as he became a green/black blur, hurtling over the smooth terrain of the valley. His heart jumped up into his throat, his stomach twisting in knots. He was in it now, and in it thick. Nowhere to go, but straight forward. So focused was the Joe on his targets ahead, that he didn’t even hear the first volley of shots from the massive watchtowers at each front corner of the Citadel. They must have been large bore, most likely fifty caliber, as they pounded large holes into the muddy ground and spewed great fountains of dirt into the night air. But the shots struck well behind him as he roared forward, clutching onto the RAM for dear life. He still kept the AR-15 pinned to the seat as he lowered himself close to the bike, barely avoiding a barrage of shots flying from the M60s just ahead. He could see the sparks flying from the large weapons, huge blooms of yellow/white, throwing the mounted rifles around like they were rag dolls. The SAW Vipers held fast and directed the fire the best they could, but the motorcycle was bearing down on them way too fast for them to get a good bead on it. With a swift twist, the light infantryman adjusted the direction of the bike even as another small volley of fifty caliber rained down on him from above. He brought the cycle into a slight turn and leaned to his left, dropping the RAM low to the ground, his shoulder almost rubbing against the wet mud. He let the AR-15 slide down the angled seat and slip smoothly into his waiting left hand, then moved it around in one fluid motion and opened fire on the sandbagged machine gun nest directly in front of him. The AR jumped wildly in his left hand, unused to being fired single handedly, but so accustomed was the Joe to his small assault rifle that he kept it aimed and kept it firm, overcoming the amazing kickback by the sheer force of his will. With insane balance, he kept the bike almost horizontal to the ground as heavy machine gun fire roared above him and his own weapon unloaded as well, the barking gunshots blending together into one violent, forceful symphony of death. With sudden lurches, the SAW Vipers in the sandbag ahead of the Joe were thrown from the volley of his small, but deadly weapon, and he threw his weight the other way, righting the bike in one smooth motion and keeping it on a straight track. He had taken out the middle gun nest and now hurled towards it, gunfire zipping by him from all directions. He could almost feel the searing heat of the paths of bullets as they roared at him from the sides and poured down on him from the watchtowers up above. Hit & Run swung the duffel bag around so it was in front of him as he bore down on the sandbags, and he squeezed his legs together, spreading open the cloth, unzipped cover. With incredible skill, the camouflaged man perched his elbows on the handlebars, holding them steady, and let his rifle swing at his side. He plunged both hands into the duffel bag and plucked out two baseball sized grenades, dark green and with the rough texture Hit & Run was used to. He thumbed the pins from them quickly, then placed his hands back on the handlebars, steering with his wrists, as his fists clenched the explosives. The front tire slammed into the sandbag and Hit & Run barely held on with his tightly clenched knees as the RAM bounced and soared into the cool night air. Breath rushed from his lungs as he held on with his knees and swiftly cast his arms out to his sides, the small round objects falling from them like puffs of smoke at a magic show. As soon as his hands released he whipped them back to handlebars to steady the bike as it crashed to the hard ground. Almost as if on cue, as soon as the tires smacked into the tightly packed dirt of the valley floor, the two gun nests shuddered and blasted apart from the force of the grenades. Hit & Run roared forward as flame and smoke licked at his uniform and blasted sand bags rained down on his hunched, low riding form. SAW Vipers were tossed casually from the nests like discarded toys, their purple and black uniforms covered with a dull gray smoke and yellow flame. Hit & Run relaxed just slightly even as another group of high caliber rounds pounded the dirt where he had landed, spitting tiny rocks and chunks of earth into the air. As the RAM swerved, corrected, then hurtled forward again, the green Joe elbowed the pouch at his side, spilling a number of the spotters out onto the ground, where they blended in with the scattered debris from the machine gun nests.

“What the blazes is going on out there?” Destro shouted, standing straight upright inside the gun turret. He pulled a pair of binoculars from his hip pouch and planted them firmly against his eyes, glaring out from behind the glimmering silver mask. Another deep rumble of thunder roared in the heavens as he squinted out at the motorcycle tearing past the smoking machine gun nests, thin streams of ground flying into the air as the bullets whizzed towards him. “Blast!” he shouted and lowered the goggles. He brought his arm up to his helmet and shouted into the miniature broadband communicator attached to his wristband. “All Vipers converge to sector…” he stopped for a moment and ran his fingers over some hidden switches in his helmet. A bright, but small LCD screen emerged in the air and he traced the path with his leather-covered finger. “—Sector 12-18…bring this insolent fool *down!*” He snarled in anger at the brazenness of the man, riding straight into Cobra territory on a motorcycle! Well, Cobra would teach him the folly of underestimating them, he was certain of that.

“We’re the closest team, Eel Nine!” the Cobra Frogman shouted, clicking off the transmitter.

“All right, everyone gear up! He must be heading right for us.” Eel Nine unstrapped his automatic weapon and checked the clip to make sure it was full.

“Sir? Weren’t we supposed to move to the slope? Advanced recon?” another one of Eel asked, looking at his squad leader curiously.

“Are you defying my orders?” Nine shouted angrily, lifting his weapon. “I can arrange it so you will nev—“ suddenly, the engine roared in volume, shaking him from his threatening remark. He spun, lifting the weapon, but the bike was already on top of them. The Eels scattered, their eyes growing wide as Nine stumbled, lifting his weapon—

*THD-THUD!!* Hit & Run bounced on the seat as the RAM pounded over the hapless Eel caught in his path just as he came around the bend. The long, flat valley was slightly round as it made its way around the tree line towards the airfield. The light infantryman winced slightly as he rolled over the shocked Eel with a series of rocking thuds, but quickly forgot about it as gunfire blasted from behind him. He squinted ahead and spotted the long, sprawling airstrip, but glanced back over his right shoulder at the large group of HISS Tanks quite a ways away, in the opposite direction. Suddenly another group of Cobras burst from the trees to his left, Night Vipers he thought, but couldn’t be sure as all he saw were dark green and black blurs as he hit the brakes and dropped low, spinning the bike around in a one eighty. Bullets drilled into the ground around him, spraying dust, dirt and small chunks of rock up into his face as he hugged the ground, the bike whipping around in a tight right controlled spin. As the RAM finished its fishtail and righted itself, the Joe grasped his AR-15 and swung it around to his right as the bike spun as well. The RAM jolted to a halt, trembling slightly and sitting still upright on the ground, its powerful engine rumbling and groaning underneath its rider. He dropped one foot, holding the bike steady and lifted the machine gun towards the trees where the Night Vipers crawled, weapons in hand. With a quick twist, the throttle screamed, the back tire thrashing into a wild, blurring spin as Hit & Run glared at the snakes, who were moving in swiftly. The lead Night Viper lifted his automatic to his shoulder and Hit & Run drew up his foot and hauled back on the trigger at the same time. The RAM plunged forward as his AR-15 exploded to life, throwing bright flashes and sparks across the dark night air. With a shout, the lead Night Viper stumbled back as the rest of his team dove for cover back into the trees, scrambling to get tree trunks between them and the assault rifle. The bike roared onward, back towards the Citadel, Hit & Run chiding himself for his dedication to the job at hand.

The two slitted eyes glared out from behind the dark black and gray camouflaged mask, piercing the night, and following the green blurs every move. He moved with the skill and savvy of a lifetime motor cross racer…finally someone worthy for her to take down. Someone with a driving skill that could actually match her own. She sneered underneath the cloth mask and glared at the Joe as he spun around in a flying cloud of loose dirt and actually headed back towards the Cobra army.

“Brave soul,” Vypra hissed, her gloved fingers twitching on the black leather clad steering wheel in front of her. “Outracing you will be the most fun I’ve had in ages.” She poked her head out of the door to her Stinger, a specially modified “Rattler” class, adorned with dark patches of camouflage to match her uniform. “Scrap Iron!” she shouted at the man who sat perched on the back of the jeep, fiddling with the quartet of large red missiles attached to the launcher on back.

“What is it Vypra?” he demanded in his hoarse, rasping whisper.

“Hang on tight!”

“What? No, this is our post—“ He could actually hear her foot stomp down on the accelerator from outside the compact vehicle and desperately clutched onto the launcher as the dark jeep rushed forward, digging deep trenches in the wet ground under the trees. It almost jumped, then it’s back wheels locked, skidding across the hard ground, spewing up dirt. The wheels caught and sent it flying forwards, Scrap Iron finally getting his grip on one of the bars on back. He planted his hand firmly on his helmet to keep it from flying off as the jeep spun forward, heading towards the flying two wheeled blur.

Hit & Run flashed a quick glance over his shoulder as he zipped forward and saw the jeep bearing down on him, it’s halogen headlights glaring towards him like a pair of angry eyes.

“Uh oh,” he said nervously, glancing down at his side, towards the overfilled leather pouch. *I’m not sure how long I’ve been here, but I gotta ditch these things and fast!* He lifted his head back to face where he was going and saw the group of HISS tanks looming ahead, still standing in formation. He focused his energy on the group of tanks ahead, trying desperately to ignore the threat charging from behind. But suddenly, the threat wasn’t just from behind. Out of the corner of his right eye he spotted another group of headlights closing fast. They didn’t look like Stingers, they were too small, but there were a few of them, and they were making a beeline for him. With a sharp growl another flare of light erupted from the darkness to his left, but it wasn’t a pair of headlights, it was the flash of a cannon. Hit & Run braked quickly and swerved as the orange and gray plume zipped just to his left and blasted a nice sized crater in the ground not two yards away. More gunfire chattered from his right, smaller, automatic fire barking from the group of headlights. The sparks shot from just above the lights themselves, like they were mounted—of course! *Ferrets!* He shouted, and as if on cue one of the familiar blue four wheelers roared through the air to his left, and he slammed on the brakes, spinning the bike around. With a thud, the four large, cushy wheels buckled as it struck the ground and it roared by, its long, orange mounted cannon smoking from the expended round. More gunfire blasted from his right as he lurched forward again, headlights suddenly bearing down on him from all directions, even above. Hit & Run pressed himself low to the bike as he zipped forward, and reached into his large duffel bag. As he swerved in and out of gunfire and rolling ATV’s he collected all of the grenades together near the top of the bag. There were four left, which wasn’t nearly enough to take out the group of snakes he was suddenly in the middle of. The HISSes loomed ahead of him, stoic, rock solid monsters, refusing to move to acknowledge the existence of this lesser being. The Joe slipped the duffel bag off of his shoulder and let it slide until his fist wrapped around it, holding it just above the ground as it whipped below the roaring RAM. He could almost feel the Ferret swerving in behind him, trying to get a clear shot, and he hauled back on the brake on the handlebar and whipped the RAM around, cocking his arm back. With a twist of his wrist, the bike lurched back forward towards the Ferret and the Joe closed the distance before he could get a shot off. As he neared the ATV, Hit & Run unleashed with a swift sidearm and hurled the duffle bag, trying to get rid of the excess weight that might slow him down. The bag hit the driver of the Ferret, a Motor Viper, high in the chest and he shouted, toppling over backwards off of the speeding vehicle. He somersaulted clumsily and violently, striking the ground with mindless velocity, twisting and thrashing with his excessive momentum from being on the Ferret. Finally he flopped face first on the hard dirt in a crumpled heap. With a strange growl, the Ferret continued its forward journey and Hit & Run glanced back just as another four-wheeler collided head first with the driver-less ATV. A small, but violent yellow flash exploded from the impact, sending the Ferret and the driver flipping end over end, landing in a pile of flesh, cloth, metal and flame. Hit & Run turned back around, pumping his arm, but the jubilation did not last long. The “Rattler” class Stinger hurtled straight towards him on a collision course just as two more Ferrets dropped in behind, holding their fire for fear of striking the jeep. Whoever was in the jeep had no similar compunctions and stuck their arm out the door, a micro-Uzi clutched in their hand. It shook briskly as it fired with an amazingly rapid cyclic rate, but Hit & Run lunged to the left, and then swerved back to the right, deftly avoiding the path of the bullets. Unfortunately, the Ferret’s behind him were too and they closed in, narrowing his options. As if that wasn’t enough, with a sudden swiftness, the rolling, dirt-colored clouds moved in overhead, shielding the moon. Almost immediately, thick clumps of rain began to fall, smacking against the hard dirt and splattering against the Joe as he tore through the ground towards the twin headlights, which would not veer off. Hit & Run adjusted the pouch at his side slightly, and then returned both hands to the handlebars, letting his rifle swing freely from its strap. Just seconds had passed from the first rolling clouds, and suddenly rain was pouring down in vicious, angry sheets, attacking the very surface of the earth and peppering the exposed men on the wheeled vehicles. The headlights were now mere feet apart, and the Joe made his move. He leaped up on the bike and drove himself down, creating a sudden jolt. The spring suspension drew in together, then popped apart and Hit & Run wrenched up at the same time, pulling the front end of the RAM right off the ground. He drew in a sharp breath as the speeding jeep slammed into the motorcycle as its momentum carried it forward and over in a clumsy, flopping jump. When the bike hit the roof of the jeep, it dipped down suddenly, caught by the reverse momentum. With a grinding shriek, the axle twisted and gnarled, tossing the RAM to one side and the camouflaged Joe riding it to the other. Suddenly, as the following Ferrets collided with the Stinger, a thundering crunch and scraping threw the jeep into a clumsy roll itself, mangling with the four-wheelers and exploding apart in a sharp, bright yellow light. Black debris and hunks of metal flew all over the valley, striking the HISS Tanks and scattering all over the surface of the ground, already growing muddy from the abusive rain. Hit & Run’s stomach lurched in his body, as he seemed to float endlessly in the air, his AR-15 slapping against his chest as he did. He struck the unforgiving ground with his right shoulder and rolled none too gracefully to a stop, groaning. The Joe lifted his head slowly and stared at the flaming wreck, astonished that two figures were slowly strolling towards him. Scrap Iron he recognized, who had removed his pistol and was stomping towards him, feverishly dusting off his uniform. Another figure behind him climbed to her feet slowly, but with purpose, and scooped up the micro Uzi that had fallen near her. She wore an elaborately camouflaged black and gray uniform with a mask covering her entire head except for her eyes.

“Stupid Joe,” Scrap Iron muttered, lifting his weapon. “I knew your luck had to run out some—“

“Incoming!” the shout was loud, but still almost lost in the torrential down pouring of rain. Still, Scrap Iron heard it clearly enough and spun around, hitting the ground at the same time, not believing what he was seeing. A group of yellow/orange streaks whistled through the air, cutting through like it was nothing, spiraling in between each other, smoke trails twisting and turning and mingling together. The first two struck the left watchtower in a brilliant white flash of light, throwing splinters and shards in all directions, over the valley. A pair of screaming figures were tossed from their perches and shouted as they dropped the several feet, to crumpled heaps on the ground. Another group of three plowed into the second watchtower with similar results; scorching wood, blinding flash, smoke and destruction.

“Yes!” Hit & Run shouted, unable to help himself as the familiar outline of the Whale roared down the steep slope, weapons blazing.

“Two volleys, two hits!” Cutter shouted triumphantly from the command post of the hovercraft. Hawk stood firm and stern next to him as Roadblock hustled to refill the missile launchers.

“You figure the air strike’s not coming?” Roadblock asked above the din of the gunfire and the pouring rain.

“We can’t wait any longer!” Hawk shouted as a cluster of small arms fire slammed into the metal wall shielding the command center. He ducked down as another round whizzed over his head. “Bazooka! Topside! Suppress that fire!” he shouted to the two men in the gun turrets.

“Yes, *SIR!*” they both shouted eagerly and spun the turrets, quickly tracking down the teams of Vipers firing on them. The barrels roared and thrashed, and the return fire halted. Roadblock slid the last gray missile into place and turned to his commanding officer.

“Sir? You want me to stay here, or ground pound with our boys?” he gestured down at Zap, Repeater, Bullhorn and Shockwave who ran full bore next to the Whale, their weapons poised and ready. Lifeline was inside the hold with the injured and whatever Joes weren’t in the Whale or the Wolverine were hoofing it.

“Not yet, no! We’re almost in ASP range, which is when it’s going to get *really* hairy.”

“Yes, sir!” Roadblock shouted, wondering how in the heck it could get much more hairy.

“No!” Destro shouted, raising his fist. “Where were those blasted Eels? They were supposed to warn us of this exact eventuality!” Another short volley of missiles streaked through the air and exploded deep into the valley, obliterating the machine gun nests that had already been taken out by Hit & Run. He lifted the communicator to his mouth as the rain actually increased in velocity, blasting down on top of him and his HISS squadron. “ASPs! We have armed insurgents coming down the slope! It is a free fire zone, fire for effect. Leave *nothing* standing!” he screamed, then switched frequencies. “Stinger squadron, this is Destro. Form up on my HISS team and prepare for intruders. On my order, once you are in position, prepare to launch all batteries!” Destro’s voice was loud and dominant, his face twisted into a glare of sudden…beaming happiness. The blood of combat roared through the man’s veins…it was a feeling he had long ago lost the feel for, but now; in the midst of it all, his heart craved it, yearned for it…wanted it above all else. In this moment, James McCullen Destro; the Destro that he knew from long ago…Destro, the evil weapons dealer, was back. “Baroness!” he shouted into the cockpit radio.

“Yes, my love?” she replied. She almost instantly could tell that a change had gone over her man.

“We’re pressing the HISS Squadron forward. As long as I breathe, these men will not get near the Citadel!”

“As you command, Destro,” she said, a smile brushing over her smooth features. With quick, succinctly ordered instructions, the HISSes began changing their formation.

“*COVER!!!*” Cutter shouted as loud and as hard as he could as the yellow and orange streaks pounded through the air in wide arcs. They dropped down towards the Joes like fire from the heavens, and Gung Ho immediately got uncomfortable flashbacks. He pressed himself up alongside the Wolverine as it moved slowly forward, its missile launchers trying to compensate for the new trajectory.

“Gung Ho!” Cover Girl shouted from the open cockpit, dropping herself down inside as the ground erupted into blasts of flame all around her. “The Whale and Wolverine are going to veer off to draw their fire! Hawk needs you, Zap, Repeater and Roadblock to move in and take out the pods!” she shouted loudly over the thunderous echoes, which had now eased slightly as the ASPs reloaded.

“You got it!” he shouted as the armored missile-tank altered its course and veered towards the left. Zap, Repeater and Roadblock dashed across the open area, keeping low. “Hawk fill you in?” The Marine asked and they all nodded affirmative. “Okay, there are five of them, and they should be reloaded by now. Let’s move out smartly. Zap, you’ve got the LAW, so you take out the far pod. I’ll frag the next one with my M203, you two,” he said, pointing to Roadblock and Repeater, “move in and wipe out the gunners on the other three. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” they all shouted and they were off and running.

Hit & Run stumbled to his feet and tripped up slightly, but soon was walking shakily towards the airfield. He had no idea what he was looking for, but the gunfire was slamming in the other direction, so he figured this was the way to go. But he didn’t get far.

“That’s far enough!” the voice was stern, yet soft. Angry and thin, but not aggressive. And, in Hit & Run’s opinion, actually kind of cute. He turned and looked at Vypra through the green/black camouflage painted on his face. The thrashing rain had washed quite a bit of it away, and it ran down over his face in streamy, dirty green rivers, meshing in with the color of his uniform. His helmet was off and who knows where, but his trusty AR-15 still hung at his side, slowly swinging back and forth.

“You got me,” he said simply, thinking that he may be able to charm his way out of this one.

“We got you,” another voice echoed and Scrap Iron emerged from the shadows behind her, his pistol trained on the Joe’s chest. Hit & Run’s hopes went up in smoke, although the low rumble in the sky, kept them from falling completely. He glanced back at the airstrip, which was only meters away, then looked back, listening for the thunder. There was a storm coming, that was for sure.

“They’re branching off! Compensate! Compensate!” Flak Viper Sixty shouted at the other ASP gunners as he spun and roared off a pair of shots at the two Joe vehicles, which had branched off for some reason. Both shots went wide and he cursed, and then began the reloading sequence. He suddenly noticed movement from the corner of his eye and whipped his head around as the shadows snaked over the wet surface of the valley, framed by the pouring rain. There was a quick yellow flash; another streak and an ASP blew apart some distance away, showering the area with blue debris. Sixty swore under his breath and slipped from the canopy, his large rifle in hand. There was a soft *WHUMP* and then another ASP fell victim to these mysterious attackers. He dropped to one knee, squinted and spotted a man weaving through the valley, a grenade launcher clutched in his grasp. He wore a bandanna on his head and a green vest with a bare chest. There was a large, green tattoo on there, which looked close to a bull’s-eye for the Flak Viper. He raised the rifle and sighted, then pulled back on the trigger.

“No you don’t!” shouted Roadblock from a few yards away. He opened up with his Browning fifty caliber and slammed a barrage of heavy fire down on Sixty. He stumbled under the attack, his weapon discharging loudly in the cool night. The bullets tore into his thickly padded body and he stumbled back under the forceful impact, but the layers upon layers of composite body armor was enough to stop even these huge rounds. Another blast of heavy machine gun ripped apart the night from behind him and he spun just in time to see another man plastering the last two ASPs with a large weapon strapped to his hip. He turned towards the large black man, sweat brimming at his brow.

“You’re out of choices, my small friend,” Roadblock sneered, cracking his knuckles. The Browning was slung across his backpack, and he only had his hands to fight. Sixty had dropped his rifle, and was still feet away from it.

“You’ll never take me alive!” he shouted and charged Roadblock, thrashing angrily. The big man stumbled as the Flak Viper ran into him, but did not budge.

“See? That’s why they call me Roadblock. Nothing gets past me.” He drove a hard fist into Sixty’s gut, doubling him over, and then brought another large hand down into a vicious strike at the back of his neck, just under the helmet. In a tenth of a second the fight was over, but the war was still raging. Quite suddenly, the Vipers must have realized they were there, and the night opened up in a bright barrage of small arms fire, tearing through the valley.

“Roadblock! Repeater!” the shout was loud and clear, but from many yards away. The two Joes sprang to their feet and charged across the empty valley, gunfire plowing away at the hard ground behind them. Fountains of dirt and mud sprayed up on their heels as they ran, their feet splashing through the muddy water that had already collected from the twenty minutes of rainfall. Zap was crouched down next to a crumpled mass that was not moving, and Roadblock’s heart sank. They were huddled behind the wreckage of a jagged ASP and the bullets whistled and zinged from the metal surface. Roadblock looked at Gung Ho as he laid there, his face contorted, his eyes open.

“Gung Ho, buddy!” Roadblock shouted at the Joe, who merely remained motionless. There was a large, torn chunk ripped away from his right side, enough to barely expose his ribs. Red flowed freely from the wound and mixed into the mud water, turning it into a nasty, crimson soup.

“What happened?” Repeater asked.

“I think it was that Flak Viper that Roadblock took out. He got one shot off with that huge rifle.”

Gung Ho coughed, but his eyes were glassy and his skin was already turning slightly pale.

“This is bad,” Roadblock muttered, mostly to himself. “Zap, get him upright, man,” he said, pulling off his dark green knitted shirt. He wore a green tank top underneath, which proudly showed off his many rippling muscles.

“Roadblock, are you nuts? It’s freezing out here!” Zap shouted.

“I’ll live. Unless we get some kind of tourniquet around that, he *won’t.*” Roadblock began fashioning a makeshift bandage and tourniquet when a low, loud thunder rumbled through the valley. The same sound Hit & Run had heard, almost half a mile away. The Joe looked to the heavens, worry creasing his brow.

“Dang,” he said. “We gotta make this quick.”

The Whale whizzed a mere foot above the valley’s surface, coasting like a big rubber raft floating on a calm pond. The ASPs had ceased their bombardment, and the night had once again become at least somewhat quiet, with the exception of the constant rumbling thunder echoing throughout the lower gray clouds.

“Plan, Hawk?” Cutter asked easing the hovercraft over by the tree line into a straight path towards the flat of the valley ahead.

“Cobra’s front line of defense has been taken out, so we’re clear to go in,” he said; squinting down towards the large, empty space before the Citadel.

“You don’t look so sure,” Cutter said, glancing towards the General.

“Well…” Hawk was interrupted by a sudden series of blinding lights flashing from the trees as they glided down the slope. Milliseconds afterwards the rapid thunder of machine gun fire roared from the jungle, orange tracers arcing tightly from the thick brush.

“Down!” shouted Cutter and jumped towards Hawk, knocking him to the floor of the command center. Tracers ripped through the cockpit, spraying glass and sparks in wide scattering bunches.

“No wonder it was so quiet down there! Destro must have rerouted the ground troops to the trees to take us out unsuspecting!” Hawk shouted down on his hands and knees as bullets whipped around overhead. “Cutter, turn this crate to starboard and bring us around!” the General pulled out his Colt handgun from his hip holster and spun around, sitting down on his rear end, his knees bent and feet planted. He pulled off four quick shots, the old, but still kicking pistol rocking in his grip. Tiny shell casings ejected from the pistol, tinging off of the metal cockpit and rolling on the floor amongst the glass fragments. The Whale kept its forward pace.

“Cutter!” Hawk shouted again, finally turning, then drew in a breath. The hovercraft pilot was hunched over in the far corner of the cockpit, his head down and baseball cap lying on the floor between his splayed legs. His left shoulder and chest were soaked with deep crimson, and his breath came in uneven rasps. Hawk lunged up and over to the steering console in one swift leap, just as sparks flew and exploded on the floor where he had just been sitting. With a graceful skid, the General slid in behind the controls, keeping his head low as still more gunfire tore just over his head and ripped even more of the canopy apart it tiny, metallic flakes. Hawk glanced up over the shattered windshield and saw Bazooka and Topside whipping their turrets around frantically, spraying heavy return fire into the woods. The barrels rocked, thrashed and thundered, the long slender ends glowing a white hot, almost translucent as scores of shell casings arced high into the air. Sparks whacked against the thick metal hide of the large beast, and danced along the top surface, but the two Joes held their ground, slamming the tree line with fifty caliber. Hawk shuffled over to the missile controls next to the navigation system, but his hopes dropped as he saw the bullet holes and ragged chunks chipped out of the expensive, elaborate console. The firing system was completely shot away, and the only way for them to slam real heavy fire power into the trees was to swivel the Whale and attack with the main cannons. As he fumbled with the navigation, he glanced out of the cockpit once again and saw the Wolverine whipping speedily down the steep slope, towards the flat valley. The bullets merely pounded off of the thick hide, and Cover Girl was taking the fight straight to Destro, now that the ASPs were nothing more than smoldering piles of shrapnel. Hawk saw that nothing stood between her and the Citadel but a large group of HISS Tanks and a small smattering of foot soldiers. Struggling with the tough decision, he pulled away from the steering controls and instead moved over to the throttle, and scooped up the radio, which sat right next to the large lever. He hoped the radio wasn’t out too as he pressed down the talk button and shouted into it.

“General Hawk to all foot soldiers! Converge on the tree line and take out their firepower! The Whale is going in, I repeat the Whale is going in!” He dropped the radio and it smacked against the console, then swung loosely on it’s coiled cord. The General wrapped both hands around the throttle, hoping he was using the right controls. He’d been on the Whale enough times to see how it was operated, but Cutter was the expert, and he had no idea how fast this thing could go. With a grunt, he wrenched the large lever swiftly upward, satisfied with the low rumbling growl that emanated from the rapidly whirling turbines just behind him. There was a sudden lurch and the Whale roared forward, Bazooka and Topside swiveling back in their turrets to get some last shots in as it sped on down the hill.

The Whale roared past the three men as they double timed it back up the hill, running low to the ground to avoid the streams of red and orange tracer that sprayed in arcing lines from the trees.

“Go go go!” Shockwave shouted, lifting his silenced Uzi and blasting away at the tree line ahead. Kevlar broke away from behind him and moved in gracefully, his own assault rifle barking loudly in the cold, wet night. Rain slammed down all around them, their combat boots splashing in the shallow puddles that had already collected in the wet soil.

“Did I hear that right?” Shockwave turned and asked Dial Tone who crouched just behind them, his automatic weapon up and ready as well.

“Yeah…the Whale’s going in, and we’re taking out the tree line!” the communications officer dropped low as tracers zipped towards them, then lifted his gray rifle and pounded off some return fire. Kevlar dropped back somewhat and joined his two teammates, still firing his Heckler & Koch into the thick forest ahead.

“Where’s Leatherneck’s team?” he asked over the pouring rain and thundering gunfire.

“They were our fire support. They were supposed to hang back and give the Whale rear cover…they’re probably a ways back!” Shockwave squinted, spotting a yellow and purple blur moving in the dark forest. With a soft curse he lifted his weapon, zeroed on it and pumped of a quick barrage. The yellow shadow spun and fell back under cover of the trees. “Keep your eyes open, boys, we’ve got HEAT Vipers out there!” he shouted, plucking a grenade off of his deep blue flack vest. He took two leaping hops, then whipped his arm forward, sending the small baseball sized object flipping end over end through the air. Just after release, he dropped stomach-first to the soaked mud as tracers tore through the air where he was standing.

“Fire in the hole!” he heard the shout from many yards away before the muffled blast shook the forest, throwing branches and wooden splinters out into the empty path. If it had taken out anyone, Shockwave wasn’t convinced. Gunfire erupted in even more rapid velocity, driving all three men to their stomachs on the ground. Wet mud and earth spat from the ground as bullets pounded down around them, getting a little close for their comfort. Shockwave reached to his belt and plucked off a set of night vision goggles, pressing them tightly to his eyes, but could not make out much. The freezing rain and cold sea breeze severely dampened the heat sensing effects and the night vision didn’t do much against the trees and thrashing water all around. Suddenly, a small group of three Vipers emerged from the woods, one of them carrying a very large weapon, an M60 by the looks of it. Another one hefted a large tripod on his back, and slammed it down into the dirt, inaudible against the raging storm.

Shockwave turned his head and shouted. “They’re setting up a hog at the edge of the trees! Concentrate your fire on my mark!” He whipped his Uzi around and emptied the clip in a wild, frantic barrage, pounding the trees where he had seen the three Vipers. Kevlar crouch-walked up next to him, his arms bucking wildly as the HK barked in his tight grip. Dial Tone half stood and shuffled to the side while doing the same. A muffled thump echoed in the night to their left and the blue masked SWAT trooper whipped his head around, just barely seeing a faint gray smoke trail arcing through the air, heading right for the trees. He smiled under his mask as the forest erupted in a muffled orange explosion, followed by alerted shouts and more frantic fire.

“Boys, I think our backup is here!” he shouted, pointing over to their left. Sure enough, Leatherneck led the way, roaring with his M-16/203 grenade launcher combination. He jacked the pump fiercely back to load another frag into the chamber, then lifted the weapon slightly and fired again, sending his arm thrashing violently back. Before the grenade hit, he righted the rifle, jamming the butt into his shoulder and squeezed the trigger, spraying the trees with 5.56-millimeter hardball. A distinctive loud *KRAKK* echoed through the air, just behind the small group and to their right. Shockwave smiled, instantly recognizing the sound of Low Light’s powerful automatic. Alpine and Clutch emerged from the dark night just behind Leatherneck, their small automatics chattering wildly, spraying even more sparks into the rain soaked night. Last but not least, Airtight pulled up the rear, clutching his large, elaborate device, which served as an analyzer/vacuum, a gas weapon, and a nine-millimeter rifle. He held the long, thick black weapon to his shoulder a blasted away, flinging smoking gas grenades into the trees. Leatherneck dropped to his knees next to Shockwave, his large rifle still thrashing in his grasp.

“Where the heck does Hawk think he’s going?” he demanded, just before thumping another grenade round into the trees. The reinforcements had been effective thus far; Shockwave noticed the gunfire dropping considerably since they had arrived.

“He’s got a clear path to the HISS Tanks,” Shockwave pointed out, pointing his finger down the slope towards the valley, which was still partially illuminated by twin halogen lamps on the Citadel. But then he halted and lifted his head to the sky, his ears perking. The constant rumbling thunder had suddenly grown in volume and in pitch. And it wasn’t stopping. It was a constant, deep growl, not sporadic. He smiled for a brief second, but then looked down and spotted the Wolverine and the Whale suddenly engaged in a pitched battle in the valley.

“Oh no,” he said softly and looked at Leatherneck, who was obviously thinking the same thing.

Hawk rocked fiercely to one side as the Whale hit the flat of the valley and bounced slightly before lunging forward again. The General eased off the throttle slightly, to bring the hovercraft a little more under control, his narrow eyes focusing intently on the group of HISS tanks just ahead, their turrets finally swiveling to engage. The Wolverine was just ahead, and had spun into a skidding stop when the barrage finally roared across the valley. But Hawk looked closely at the HISS squad, and none of them had fired. Curious, he looked around just in time to see a half dozen large, red rockets searing through the air and whispering over the wet ground tailed by orange/gray flame and rolling smoke trails. *Stingers!* His mind barked as he brought the Whale to a shuddering halt. A hidden squad of the Cobra Jeeps! The rockets roared through the valley and slammed headlong into the thin green armored Wolverine, resulting in a sudden white flash and yellow explosion, tossing the powerful vehicle end over end amidst sprinkling Army green shrapnel and trails of gray smoke. Cover Girl lay stomach first in the wet ground, the Wolverine teetering and flaming a few yards behind her. Hawk moved over to the controls, his eyes searching and hands clutching for whatever he could find to spin him around and take cover.

“I…I’ll get it….” A voice muttered from behind him. The General spun around as Cutter stood shakily, reaching for the controls.

“Cutter! You’re in no shape—“

“With all due respect, sir, I could drive this crate dead and buried better than you can alive and kicking.”

Hawk smirked, backing away slightly, but the smirk didn’t last long as another rocket barrage erupted from the other side of the valley. Bazooka and Topside swiveled from concentrating their fire on the first group, to trying to take out the second group as the rockets hummed in closer. Cutter slammed the throttle forward and spun the Whale around, sending Hawk stumbling. It jumped to a violent start and skidded over the wet ground, zipping towards the trees. But they were caught. The first group circled back in front of the hovercraft and unleashed the last of their red missiles, sending four red streaks whipping through the rainy, dark air.

“Crud!” Cutter shouted, bringing the Whale into a controlled spin. “Bail! Now!” he shouted at the turret drivers, who happily obliged, hauling themselves from their round prisons and scrambling over the surface of the Whale.

“Hawk…get out, we’re out of ti—“ his voice was interrupted by the thunderous slam of missiles striking the Whale broadside in a brilliant bright splash. The hovercraft launched into the air and flipped over on its roof in a violent crunch and tearing of metal. The rubber bottom tore apart under the explosion, spraying shredded black all over the valley floor among the sparks and green metal chunks. With an uncertain shake, the hovercraft rolled back and forth on it’s crushed, mangled roof, the metal twisting and rending under it’s own weight, with orange flames fluttering from the bottom of the large vehicle. Hawk pushed himself up to his knees, his hands almost sinking into the soft, muddy surface of the Earth. Rain still pounded down around him as he turned and spotted Cutter lying prone underneath the Whale. He half crawled forward on hands and knees, feeling a slick wetness rolling through his short blonde hair and over his face, but he felt no pain.

“C’mon, Cutter,” he said, extending his hand.

“The C—Captain…m…must go down with his sh…ship,” the Coast Guard man mumbled with a struggled groan, the joking, sarcastic tone just barely audible.

“Shut up, Cutter and let’s go,” the General said with a light twinge of humor and wrapped his hand around Cutter’s bare, bloodied arm. They limped from the wreckage as the flames roared higher, viciously battling the torrential downpour for control of the blaze. Hawk lifted his head as the shuddering, violent roar of thunder threatened to rip the heavens down and send them crashing to the Earth. It wasn’t a normal clap, it was rolling, growling, shaking sound that Hawk could almost feel in his bones. He whipped his head around and saw the cover of trees many meters away, seeming like miles and miles. It did indeed seem like they were certainly out of time.

# CHAPTER FOUR

**On The Brink**

Destro fought the urge to laugh out loud. A deep rumbling, evil guffaw, that would have most certainly been out of place on the raging battlefield. Only the battlefield was not raging anymore. The HISS squadron had not fired a shot. It had done nothing but move the formation, and in burning wreckage not five hundred yards away sat GI Joe’s only two armored vehicles. The only vehicles that had had even the slightest chance of taking on the HISS tanks. The only vehicles that could have possibly saved the day for the Joe team were crumpled, jagged heaps, orange and yellow flame snaking towards the skies, and gray/black smoke belching from the wrecks. He didn’t know who had survived the wrecks or how many, but at this point it did not matter…it was just a matter of time from here on until the Vipers got done with the slope, and regrouped to take out any last foot soldiers. Besides, there were the Stingers and the HISSes…one of each of the vehicles could easily wipe out a small cadre of Joes. As it was there were a dozen of each, positioned and ready for a final, violent sweep, and the day would be theirs. The large Scottish man’s eyes danced and gleamed behind his rippling silver mask. An invisible smirk spread across his face, hidden behind the emotionless metal; the cold, hard steel, which matched his newfound mentality perfectly. He had forgotten the beauty of well-laid plans coming together; of the thrill of combat and the emphatic pleasure of routing one’s enemy on the battlefield. They were feelings he welcomed back into his well-muscled body, ones that he had missed over the past years without even realizing it. He was home now, he knew that. Cobra was where he belonged, now and forever. He would not forget that again.

“Baroness!” he barked, his helmet mike carrying the signal down to the cockpit.

“Yes, my dear?” she asked smoothly, her light hinted accent music as always to Destro’s ears.

“Radio the Tele Viper stationed with the various Vipers in the jungle, guarding our perimeter. I want them to circle back and sweep the valley for survivors…” he glanced over, far to his left and smiled when he spotted the men gathered there. There were two Joes hunched over a fallen one, over by one of the destroyed ASPs. A third one was dragging another over to their group, the female who had been driving the missile-tank.

“Send a group to sector thirteen-four immediately,” he reported. “The rest can sweep the wreckage for any survivors.”

“As you command, my Lord.”

Destro smiled broadly, the term bringing even more elation to him. He waited brief seconds, and his radio crackled to life in his ear.

“Destro…they are not responding,” she said simply, her eyes wondering.

The broad man in the silver mask faltered his smile faintly, but was not actually that surprised. “Hmm…very well…contact Scrap Iron…have him sweep the Stinger squadron through, destroying everything in his path.”

“As you wish.” Destro leaned back slightly, the thunder pounding throughout the sky in sudden deep, growling violence. The rumble practically shook the weapons expert as he sat in the turret and he immediately reached for the goggles strapped to the belt around his waist even as The Baroness’ melodic voice echoed in his earpiece.

“H…he is not responding either, Destro,” she said with nervous anxiousness.

“Bah!” Destro shouted as he lifted the binoculars to his eyes. They were a modern M.A.R.S. design that he had overseen himself, capable of astounding magnification and atmospheric readouts. Slamming rain and violent, stormy winds did not interfere in *this* signal as he adjusted the magnification and sucked in a quick breath, the thunder growing in volume. “What?” was the only word he could stammer out as the shadows drifted over the dark clouds, streaking through the skies, all but invisible, but very, very much audible. The two flanking shadows were unmistakable in their shapes as they whipped through the gray clouds, approaching the coast even as Destro watched, the magnification at its highest setting. The sleek, narrow body…the triangular, arrow-like limbs tucked tight into the body, screeching through the night sky, tearing messily through the black clouds like a dull knife through cotton. F-14’s…Skystrikers. Destro could not believe it. *They DARE?* His mind screamed even as he focused on the strange center shadow. Another slender, aerodynamic body, but the wings were upswept instead of tucked back. An X-30. He was suddenly certain of it. *Fools! They’re absolute fools! The Early Warning System…* he lowered his goggles and craned his neck around, searching his own skies for friendly aircraft. Certainly the radar umbrella had spotted the planes by now! The Mamba’s should be well on their way. The system was designed so interference could be run far *before* enemy planes were on the island. Yet here were the planes, still almost a few klicks away, but closing fast. *Too* fast.

“Destro to Central Command! Come in Central Command!” He shouted into his radio. There was only static. “*Tele-Viper!!!*” the scream was loud and violent, anger boiling in his massive, leather clad frame. He had gone from utter elation to a miserable downward spiral of confusion, uncertainty and cold reality. Central Command wasn’t answering. The Early Warning System was down. Destro’s eyes fluttered behind his mask, his mouth contorting and his fists closing. His breath came rapidly, pounding in his lungs, matching beats with his hammering heart. It was up to him now. With calm confidence he scooped up the radio and glanced up at the cloud cover and pouring rains above, suddenly not feeling quite so panicked. Visibility was awful. There was no way the HISS team could be spotted. *No Way.* Still, he adjusted frequency even as the thunder grew to a rumbling crescendo, the numerous sonic booms rocking throughout the valley.

“Destro to the motor pool! Wild Weasel, answer me blast you!”

There was some seconds of uncomfortable silence as Destro’s heart picked up its pace once again, threatening to burst from his broad chest and hop along the dark steel surface of the Cobra Tank. Finally his radio crackled.

“This is Wild Weasel, Destro. Go ahead.”

“Weasel! Get Zartan on the radio now!”

“Zartan left a few minutes ago with his spare bow and arrow, sir. I think we may have troubles in here.”

Destro bowed his head and slammed his fist on the HISS turret. “Fine! Scramble all Mambas *NOW!* We have airborne intruders closing in fast!”

“Understood, sir,” Wild Weasel said with a calmness that infuriated Destro. As long as the mercenary got his paycheck, he could care less apparently.

“I want them all launched and on my coordinates ten minutes ago!” Destro screamed and disconnected the radio. His face was furious as the thunder grew even louder.

“What is that?” the young girl asked, twisting her neck around, and looking to the skies.

“Not thunder that’s for sure,” Scrap Iron muttered, his pistol clamped in his tight fist, pointing at the Joe in front of them.

“That sound,” Hit & Run started, frowning, “is the sound of the tides. They’re turning.” His face was cold, mean and serious.

Scrap Iron laughed a gravelly, throaty laugh. “Keep dreaming, soldier boy!” he shouted, extending his arm.

“Listen carefully, Snake,” Hit & Run continued, lifting his head to the sky. “They’re planes. Can you say ‘air strike?’”

Vypra scowled deeply behind her facemask, which twisted slightly with the movement. “Don’t be a fool! Look at that cloud cover!” She waved at the skies above, which were rolling with dark gray, bulbous cotton ball clouds. “They wouldn’t be able to see far enough to shoot a spitball!”

“Well,” Hit & Run replied, his face lightening a little, “unless there were some spotters down here, right?”

Scrap Iron laughed out loud. “Where were your spotters, Joe? In the tank that just exploded? Or in the hovercraft which just flipped over and burst into flame? You’re a lousy liar, Joe.”

“If it’s one thing I can’t stand,” sputtered the female Cobra leveling her own weapon. “Is a bad liar. I think it’s time for you to die.” Her finger touched lightly against the trigger as the thunder grew in pitch and threatened to shake apart the very Earth. She glanced back and Hit & Run moved. Like a green/black blur, the Joe darted forward with lightning speed and liquid grace, sweeping his foot out and catching Vypra in her ankles. She stumbled and he clamped around her wrists, then twisted, using her own center of gravity to send her in a complete flip until she struck the wet mud with her back, grunting and splattering dirty water in an arc around her. Scrap Iron whipped his arm around, tracking the light infantryman with his pistol, but the Joe was already darting at him, and was quickly inside his range of motion, knocking his gun arm aside even as it went off with a sharp *BAM*, briefly illuminating the night for that split second. He grabbed Scrap Iron by the collar and yanked him down as he brought his knee up, plowing it into his gut and hunching the missile specialist deep over his knee. He brought his hands up for a vicious chop, but a blast of metal across the back of his skull sent him sprawling. Spinning around as he fell forward, the Joe saw Vypra back on her feet, the automatic back in her hand. She lowered it, scowling, and slowly pulled back on the trigger.

“This way, Beachhead!” Ripcord shouted through puffy, red-crusted lips. The red streaks across his face had dried in the moments since the fight, and his muscles seemed to have loosened up as he and the Army Ranger dashed through the smooth, gray hallways. Beachhead’s face was fully exposed now, his green knit mask fashioned into a makeshift bandage and wrapped around his head, which had thankfully stopped bleeding. They had taken the left turn directly after the Viper’s quarters, but found the trip to be a little longer than they expected, having to wind through a maze of turns and branching halls. So far they had encountered no opposition since Zartan, but they were ready, their weapons raised. A low rumble trembled throughout the hall as they neared the last left turn. Ripcord was sure they were getting close, and he slid to a quick halt at the last bend, his feet sliding along the floor until he skidded to a stop. He spun his body around the corner, face to face with a quartet of Vipers guarding a large garage door, which was shut tight.

“Hey!” the lead Viper, dressed in a dull gray uniform shouted at the paratrooper, and as one, four weapons opened up, their roar on the verge of deafening in the tight hallway. Ripcord whipped himself back around as sparks spun and flew from the wall where he was standing. Beachhead pulled up the rear, still at a full run.

“Beach—“ Ripcord said as the Ranger approached at a near sprint.

“I’m going low, you go high,” he barked as he dashed past and dropped into a skillful crouch, one knee planted on the floor. He slid along the floor, dropped low, his assault rifle tucked neatly under his arm. Gunfire exploded from the Vipers as he slid along, but went high, whizzing just over his now unmasked head. Twisting as he slid, he drew aim on the left two Vipers and punched the trigger, the rifle jumping in his hand, tossing sparks, smoke and deadly lead in the small passage. The left Viper shouted and was thrown violently backwards with the force, his back whacking hard against the metal wall, and Beachhead swiftly shifted aim, still sliding along, and punched the trigger again, dropping the next Viper in line. With frantic shouts, the lead Viper and the last shifted their aim to shoot at the lower target when Ripcord jumped out from behind the wall his own rifle locked into his shoulder. He screamed to draw their attention as the world shifted into slow motion, the Joe seemingly hanging in the air as he moved, the gun thumping powerfully against his muscled arm. A shower of silver exploded from the lead Viper’s mirrored facemask and he clutched his face, dropping the weapon, and fell as the Joe reached the peak of his jump. Ripcord was almost horizontal with the floor as he flew through the air and shifted aim, then sprayed the back corner with more deadly lead, sending the last Viper sprawling to the floor amidst a spray of sparks and metal fragments from the wall. Ripcord struck the floor with his shoulder, spun into a sideways somersault, then sprang up to one knee, ending up just behind Beachhead, crouched against the far wall, both weapons trained on the door. The four Vipers lay in heaps, gun smoke still lingering in the stale air, bullet holes scattered across the metal walls and ridged garage door.

“Clear!” shouted Beachhead, lifting his weapon.

“Clear!” replied Ripcord, doing the same, and then standing.

Beachhead climbed to his feet, glancing back at the bloodied paratrooper. “What’s this?” he asked, noting Ripcord’s positioning. “Using me for cover? Thanks a lot!”

“Hey, you got the flack vest, old man,” Ripcord joshed, gesturing to Beachhead’s prematurely gray hair. The joking stopped and they glared at the wide door in front of them, shut tight with a small display just above it on the wall, a flashing red light blinking from it. *Do Not Enter: Launch Pad In Use.* The rumble shook the floor where they stood and they looked at each other, and then looked down at the sprawled Vipers, each one with a pair of grenades strapped to their chest. With swift movements, the two Joes scooped up the explosives and retreated to the corner, clutching them tight.

“We start with one each, all right?” Beachhead asked, popping the pin off of the one clutched tight in his hand. Ripcord nodded and repeated the motion.

“Fire in the hole!” the Ranger shouted and whipped his grenade down the hall, Ripcord following suit. They swung back around the wall, pressing their bodies close as the sudden sharp blast tore through the passageway. Thick chunks of concrete floor and thin, razor sharp metallic shards spun and flew down the hall whipping past the Joes and clattering to the floor and wall next to them. As soon as the smoke started to clear they whipped back around, weapons at the ready. The garage door was torn and shredded, a thick gray cloud of exhaust rolling from the chamber beyond, and a loud, deafening racket of numerous jet engines igniting at once.

“Uh oh,” Ripcord said as the shuffled forward. “Our boys are gonna get some Mambas thrown at them!” The room was large, and literally cavernous. The ceiling and a large portion of the upper walls were jagged, dark rock, stalactites dangling and rock face jutting out in uneven patters. With another violent shudder, the rumbling almost shook the men off their feet as the ceiling trembled with the force of a giant earthquake. Suddenly, impossibly, the whole rocky, jagged ceiling slowly began to recede into the walls on the side, sliding smoothly and evenly backwards opening up a large empty space in the top of the motor pool, letting the cool air of the gulf night drift in to the chamber. Ripcord whistled.

“Impressed, kid?” Beachhead asked, glaring over the large room. Only a section of it was filled at this point, apparently all of the land based vehicles were in use. But the air force more than made up for it. There were ten Mambas; sleek, narrow, purple and black double bladed helicopters that had vertical takeoff and landing capabilities, but were as swift, maneuverable and armed as any airplane in the sky. A few Fangs hovered above the ground as well, lifting slowly to the opening in the ceiling, piloted by Gyro Vipers, who had been promoted from the Rotor Vipers of old. The Mambas were taking off in shifts; each one only had one of the three cockpits filled, some Gyro Vipers and some with Aero Vipers. The other two were pods of a sort, which could be used as transportation, or as quick, but not very maneuverable rocket sleds. Three Mambas rose slowly, the propellers whipping a vicious wind down at the two Joes as they stood there, weapons drawn.

“Somehow I don’t think these pea shooters will be very effective down here!” Ripcord shouted above the thrashing winds, holding his hand above his head to try and shield the force. Two sudden sharp gunshots quickly told him that not everyone was of that same opinion. The two Joes stumbled back as bullets plowed into the hard floor at their feet, spitting up chunks of concrete and mortar. Wild Weasel stood atop a short curved ladder leading to the cockpit of a Rattler, the deep blue Cobra jet based on a souped-up version of the U.S. Army’s A-10. Primarily used as a “Tank Smasher”, the Rattler had evolved into a speedy, maneuverable force to be reckoned with in Cobra’s air arsenal. Piloted by Wild Weasel, the Rattler could theoretically take out any other plane in the sky.

“Don’t try and stop us, Joes!” he screamed through his large round helmet. His pistol barked a few more quick times, and he slipped into his cockpit, quickly yanking down the reinforced Plexiglas canopy. Ripcord squeezed off a quick blast of gunfire, which banged into the side of the large plane, but did little to no damage. The large, round, wing-mounted engines suddenly ignited in the vertical position, throwing the plane quite suddenly into the air among the group of Mambas, which were now all climbing into the opening in the ceiling. It deftly weaved between hovering battle copters and spinning rotors, and then was up into the night. It’s turbines swung down into the horizontal position and with a sudden blast, the Rattler was off, Mambas close behind.

“That was a waste of time,” Beachhead said, shaking his head.

“C’mon, Beach,” Ripcord shouted to the Ranger, heading back out the door. “We’ve got to get back to the command center. Maybe they have a radio we can call our buddies with to let them know what’s coming!”

Beachhead fought the urge to say it would be far too late and followed his buddy into the hallway.

Hit & Run forced his eyes to stay open even as gunfire roared from mere feet away. The Joe was back first on the ground, the female Cobra driver standing above him, gun drawn and aimed. She was merciless, emotionless, and despite the weapon, Hit & Run still thought she was pretty cute. He imagined being killed by her might change that opinion just slightly. The Joe winced, expecting the impact, but saw instead that Vypra was backpedaling, lifting her hands in the air. The light infantryman jumped to his feet and spun, his eyes wide and unbelieving, as his jaw dropped when they walked through the trees. A mustached man in camouflage was first, whom the Joe didn’t recognize, but the man draped over his shoulder was a familiar face with a short crew cut, the faint smirk on his puffy and beaten face even though he looked the worse for wear. The man with the moustache held a small Uzi, still pointed at Vypra, who had dropped her weapon.

“Duke!” Hit & Run shouted for joy as he moved in and took the sergeant from the other man’s shoulder. Duke could walk on his own, but stumbled slightly, held up by the young man. Falcon and Recondo emerged next, Muskrat practically carried by them. The swamp fighter was still unconscious, although the bleeding seemed to have eased slightly. Hit & Run’s eyes grew even wider when he saw who exited next. Stalker limped slightly, held up by Flint, his face cocky as ever underneath his lopsided beret. They all convened into a small group, happy chatter coming from everyone. Mike, the Rotor Viper walked out next, but was for the most part unnoticed, with Wet Suit just behind.

“On your stomach, sister,” Claymore muttered, breaking away from the group, directing with his machine gun. Vypra grudgingly complied. Hit & Run looked around, relieved to see Wet Suit okay for the most part, but then grew concerned.

“Isn’t Beachhead with you guys?” he asked, wondering about his friend. Stalker saw the worry in his face and rushed to console him.

“Relax, kid…he and Ripcord branched off to find the motor pool. Look for the weapon. We’re supposed to meet them in one hour, back in Central Command.”

Hit & Run looked somewhat relieved, but then his eyes darted back to Vypra. “What did I tell you? The tides are changing, Snake,” he said with mild satisfaction.

“Ha!” She laughed. “You precious planes still don’t have any targets to shoot at, Joe! Where are your precious spotters, hmmm?” she asked with a snicker.

Hit & Run ran a hand over the leather pouch that hung at his side, glancing down, but remained smiling.

“Well, they were in here. But I dumped them out in your little jeep as I jumped over it,” he gave her a wink and a smile.

“When that thing exploded, it must have scattered them *all over* the valley.”

Vypra’s eyes grew wide with rage even as she stayed prone on the ground. The thunder still rumbled loud and long, still growing in volume as the planes grew nearer. But another sound had joined the thunder. A wild, rapid shriek and thumping. Lightning quick thumps one right after another slowly echoed from the south.

*ThumpThupThupThupthupthupthupthupthupthupthupthupthupthup*

Hit & Run looked to the sky as Vypra grinned under her mask. The Mambas streaked overhead, their propellers stirring up small cyclones of dirty water and spinning them around, mixing with the pouring rain. Hit & Run ducked down as the battle copters whipped overhead, on a direct intercept course for their salvation.

“This is Striker One to Striker Two, come in, Striker Two,” Ace’s smooth, low voice echoed inside the tiny cockpit as it zipped through the dark, murky clouds off the coast of Cobra Island. It reminded him of swimming through a mud puddle, actually, quick and easy to pass through, but you couldn’t see jack. His black flight helmet was pulled down tightly over his shortly cropped red hair and his eyes squinted out from under the goggles, glaring at the instrument panel in front of him. It was much more elaborate and complex than it was the first time he flew in a Skystriker, but he had kept with the times, instructing when he wasn’t flying himself. He had so many hours in at this point, he couldn’t possibly calculate them all, and seriously thought that he had spent more time flying than he had sleeping in his life. Combine his time flying and playing cards, and there was no doubt sleeping came a distant second. He flipped on a new addition to the plane, the sonar dish, which was implanted just under the black nose of the sleek jet and monitored the various sounds surrounding the plane much like a submarine used sonar deep under the water. In flying conditions like this, it was sometimes necessary to fly by sound instead of sight and radar.

“This is Striker Two, Ace…go ahead,” Ghostrider replied steering his own Skystriker smoothly through the thick cloud cover.

“I’ve got land mass dead ahead, Two, prepare to descend and pop the wings on my mark.”

“Affirmative.”

Ace slightly adjusted the chock and switched his frequency quickly. “Three, this is One, do you read?”

“Yeah, One, Slipstream here on your six. I’ve got land mass dead ahead and drawing close.”

“Confirms my readings, Slipstream. Two and I are going in low and hard, you’re our rear cover.”

“I copy, One. How’s the handling with the extra armament?”

“Just fine. We just ditched the extra fuel tank and added some bomb racks. Our air-to-air Sparrows and Sidewinders are still there, and the weight and balance matches up fine.”

“Good to hear. When it all goes down, I don’t want to have to stop and pick your sorry butt up.” Slipstream snickered slightly.

“Just worry about your own butt, Three; and tell you what, the one with the most kills deals first back at the Flagg.”

“Works for me, Ace…I didn’t want that last paycheck anyway.”

Ace chuckled softly and glanced back down at his radar, the laugh choking in his throat. Just as he saw the approaching blips, his radio crackled from all channels.

“One, this is Three! Bogeys at ten o’clock low and swarming in!”

“I see them three; Two pop those wings now!”

“I hear you!” The two Skystrikers cut their afterburners and their sleek, arrow-like wings slammed out at a sharp angle, slowing their rapid approach. In the out position, the Skystrikers were much slower, but the maneuverability was necessary in close combat. The wings hit with a *CHUNG!!!* and the two white jets pulled up and away out of formation, already circling around.

“One, I’m going in!” Slipstream’s voice echoed harshly in Ace’s radio.

“Don’t be a hero!” the squad leader replied cranking his jet around in a tight right bank.

The Conquest pounded down through the cloud cover, it’s jets screaming, and dark gray cotton clinging to its wings like salt-water taffy. It was slightly modified from the original version, colored in green and brown camouflage instead of its older gray, black and yellow. Slipstream liked the new look immensely. Anything that made him a harder target was all right in his book. As soon as he ripped through the bottom layer of clouds and plunged down into the dark night, two Mambas filled up his screen, roaring straight at him, their twin propellers screaming. Immediately, both battle copters opened fire with their chin turrets, twin red cannons below the main pod, firing twenty-millimeter armor piercing rounds. Slipstream brought the X-30 into a sudden and immediate dive, his stomach lurching, but lurching much less than it had all those years ago when he first flew the experimental warplane. It was light and fast, Slipstream called it “Speed Demon” for short, and there was no other aircraft he’d rather be behind the stick of. Sparks roared in the air above him as he dove below the Mambas, and he swore he heard the light tinkling of shell casings clattering against the thick skin of his plane. Suddenly another craft was in his radar, a smaller one, moving more like a conventional helicopter. As he brought the Conquest up into a tight bank, the craft appeared in his windshield, and was exactly as he suspected. A Fang. He smiled; almost thinking it was a waste of bullets as he yanked back on the red trigger embedded in his flight stick. The twin twenty millimeters embedded in the nose of the narrow plane exploded to life, brightening that portion of the sky with white throbbing flashes. With an uncertain lurch, the Fang moved away, but the barrage blasted into it full bore and it exploded in a white/yellow flame, black debris sprinkling the ground below. The Joe pilot smirked for a millisecond before his threat indicator blared to life, bathing the cockpit in a warm red glow.

Ace brought the Skystriker X-14 around in a tight, right bank, just as Two broke away and dove for the surface of the island. He looked up out of his cockpit as his plane turned, becoming sideways in the air, almost perpendicular to the wet ground and rocky ocean water below. Ace noticed then for the first time that they had been intercepted well before their target range, and had to move in quickly. Out of the corner of his eye as he turned a purple black blur floated across his range of vision, disappearing quickly behind him. His radar showed two more faint blips to his south and below, and they were converging quickly. The Joe pilot straightened out, glancing quickly behind him, and saw a flash of black spinning metal just off to his left.

“Sneaky,” he muttered, “but you can’t stay in my blind spot with those propellers!” Ace kept the jet at a constant forward pace, waiting for the right time. As soon as the red light on his threat indicator flashed, he yanked back on the stick and drew the jet into a steep climb. Two blood red, spear-like missiles roared underneath him as he ascended, and he wrenched the stick back around to his right, bringing the jet around and righted again, this time heading back towards the copter. The Mamba pulled up and away, which was the worst mistake he could make as Ace directed the Skystriker inside his turning radius and unleashed his left hand Sparrow “fire and forget” heat seeking missile. The white jet plunged back earthward as the missile struck pay dirt, blasting the purple helicopter into smoldering fragments.

“One down,” he said confidently, bringing the jet back around into a slight descent, his radar already filling up with more bogeys.

Ghostrider skimmed the surface of the island, his Skystriker running near to the ground enough that his imminent crash warning was flashing. The waves from the rocky beach had slapped up against the bottom of his plane as he scoped out the LCT where it was embedded in the sandy dunes. He brought the jet up slightly as he zoomed by the volcano, and switched on his ground radar, searching for the targets on infrared. He was below the clouds, but the rushing rain impaired his vision considerably, and it would have been impossible to hit any ground targets whatsoever without the spotters. He desperately hoped the Assault Team was able to set the spotters, but he wasn’t sure. The Citadel suddenly appeared before him, still quite a ways away, but he came closing in and his radar lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Bingo!” he shouted, grinning at the numerous radar contacts, down on ground surface. He was too focused on the ground, and suddenly his plane jolted and shook, thrashing about like a dog being given its monthly bath. He brought the jet quickly back under control and glanced out the side of his canopy, spotting the three Mambas closing in on him. His right wing was peppered with twenty-millimeter, but was holding together just fine without any serious damage done. He was not sure how long that would last with the three battle copters closing in fast.

“Lifeline! Lifeline!” Hawk shouted fiercely, pounding on the door leading into the cargo hold of the Whale. Behind him Cutter leaned on his shoulder for support and Topside and Bazooka were helping each other stay upright. But Lifeline and Blackout had not emerged from the hold yet with the wounded, and that had Hawk a little worried, especially now that the planes were engaged in pitched battle above with a score of Cobra Mambas. Gunfire roared in the heavens like angry thunder, muzzle flashes and explosions the responding lightning. Hawk turned around and held Cutter out to lean on the other two, giving them a slightly apologetic look. He ran a hand through his soaked hair, his breath coming hard underneath the cold, driving rain, which battered the ground and all who stood upon it. With a swift kick, Hawk sent his combat booted foot in a sudden jolt, cracking it against the window of the hold. Already weakened by the crash, the window caved in, shattering gummy pieces of windshield into the tiny alcove behind. Hawk stuck his head through the small opening, his blue eyes struggling to adjust to the darkness. The wounded men were tipped over and lay in crumpled heaps on the floor, but actually looked okay, although both were still unconscious. Blackout lay near the exit, his helmet off and on the floor, and Lifeline was a few feet behind him, lying prone.

“Joes, let’s go! Snap to it!” Hawk shouted loudly, his voice a raging echo inside the tight confines of the hold. Lifeline immediately sat up, shaking his head, and running a hand over his dark hair, looking around to see if he could spot his helmet. His green glasses lay askew on his face, but he adjusted them and crawled over to the door, quickly checking out Blackout, who awoke with the prodding.

“General,” Lifeline said, his eyes fluttering. “What happened, sir?”

“Stinger ambush, troop. C’mon, get it together, we don’t have time to dilly dally here!”

Blackout swiftly shook the cobwebs off and reached down, wrapping his hands around the silver torch that hooked to his leg. “Stand back, Lifeline,” he said softly and the medic complied, with Hawk doing the same. A brilliant, blinding light scorched from the cylinder and struck the metal plated, wrenched and twisted door that locked them inside. The torch was cutting, but Hawk was sure it wasn’t fast enough.

“How is she?” Zap shouted over the driving rain as Roadblock dragged Cover Girl through the mud and dirt over to where they sat behind the ASP.

“She’s breathin’! Besides that, you’d have to ask Lifeline.” His eyes were squinted as the large globs of rainwater pounded down on his bald head and dark face. Water dripped from his dark goatee and ran in streams over his tank top he wore, now that his green knit shirt was soaked with Gung Ho’s blood.

“The Jarhead’s not doing too hot,” Repeater said solemnly, crouching over him.

“Well, hot or not, we’ve got to move, and we’ve got to move now! Our flyboys are here, and when the bombs start droppin’ ole Roadblock’s not going to be anywhere near!”

“I agree with that sentiment. The trees?” Zap asked, pointing over to the thick trees that sprouted at the north side of the valley. They weren’t close, but they beat low crawling past HISS Tanks and Stingers.

“Sounds like a plan,” Roadblock nodded and walked over to the Marine. “I’ll take Gung Ho. The pretty lady over there is nice and light, I figure one of you boys can handle her,” he flashed a bright smile and hefted Gung Ho onto his shoulders, his enormous biceps bulging and rippling with every motion. He broke into a slow jog as Zap and Repeater lifted Cover Girl. Zap glanced up into the sky and spotted a Skystriker, swiftly engaging three Mambas.

“I hope that’s you, Ace,” he said softly. “Anybody else’d be dog meat.”

Ghostrider hit the firing mechanism and released one Sparrow, then banked away to his right, saying a silent prayer in his head. With a white hot flash, the Sparrow collided with the Mamba’s rotor mechanism, blasting it to pieces and sending chunks of black iron scattering in all directions. Smoke and flame roared from the impact and the battle copter went into a wobbling downward spiral, and then plunged towards the Earth.

“Damn!” Roadblock shouted as the flaming hulk of twisted purple wreckage spun down towards the small group, chunks of metal breaking away and falling with it. “Back that way!” he shouted frantically, turning towards the other two Joes. They stumbled back reflexively, then broke into a quick run as the fireball roared towards the valley. It plowed into the wet ground with the force of a hundred mile tall jackhammer, sending a shuddering pulse throughout the valley floor. Another explosion rocked the wreckage as it hit, spraying shrapnel and smoke in broad arcs fifty feet around. Roadblock actually felt the warm air of the shockwave pluck him from the ground and carry him through the air, although none too gently. Gung Ho tumbled to the ground as the big man spun through the air, his arms clawing at nothing and his legs pumping, surrounded by flaming debris. With a dull thud he pounded against the soft ground and lay there, not moving. Zap ran over to him, with Repeater hot on his heels, Cover Girl draped over his right shoulder.

“Dang!” the rocket specialist shouted, looking at the two men sprawled on the ground. He looked back at the stedi-cam gunner, shaking his head. “There is no way we can carry them all to the tree line!” he shouted. Repeater furrowed his brow, trying to think.

“Here,” he said, pulling the wounded Joe from his shoulder and offering her as if a gift. “Take Cover Girl and hit the trees, I’ll stay with these guys. Drop her off and come right back, we’ll make a second trip.”

“There’s no time!”

“There’s no *choice.* Go!”

Zap grimaced, but grabbed Cover Girl and ran for the trees, not looking back.

Ghostrider smiled as his white plane tore through the sky, deftly weaving to avoid the gunfire that rained towards it from behind. The two Mambas converged on him, trying to catch him in a crossfire, but he dove, expecting them to compensate. They did quickly, and he immediately pulled up and around barely avoiding the grouping of red missiles as they whizzed just beneath him. Suddenly, he was above and tearing down towards them, the two large blobs filling his crosshairs. He just couldn’t resist and unloaded a full salvo in a brutal series of orange/yellow streaks and light gray smoke trails. The Skystriker climbed steeply just as the missiles swarmed from their hooks and struck the pair of Mambas head on with a raging fury, slamming them into so much useless scrap metal, sprinkling down from the heavens. Ghostrider banked the plane around and prepared for the first bombing run.

Ace banked left as another Mamba burst into flame from a long burst of his twin cannons just on either side of the narrow nose of the Skystriker. It fell towards the rocky ocean, its propellers no longer functional and disappeared underneath the rushing green surface of the water. Ace marked a second kill in his kill column as he continued the tight bank and rushed back towards the valley, when suddenly two Fangs and another Mamba flanked him. He cursed the weather and his instrument panel as he climbed quickly, two narrow, long Fang missiles roaring just beneath his firing engines. Ignoring the moans and pleas of his tortured stomach, the expert pilot brought the plane into a full loop roaring back over his pursuers upside down and glaring down at them from behind the clear cockpit. The two Fangs broke off as the Skystriker swooped back down and launched two Sidewinders at close range. The Mamba dipped quickly, then rose sharply, its wake throwing off the rockets and sending them spiraling towards the ocean, and then splashing harmlessly in the water. Ace grimaced and pressed his thumb on the button to launch his last Sparrow, but decided against it, bringing the Skystriker in close to the Mamba’s tail. The Gyro Viper looked back from under his red tinted windshield and broke away, but Ace turned more sharply and plastered the Mamba with his machine guns, chewing it apart and spraying Mamba pieces out into the ocean. The helicopter swerved, then dipped and plowed into a rocky formation on the coast, bursting into bright flame.

“That’s three,” Ace said confidently, forgetting the Fangs for just a second until he plane rocked with the force of their gunfire. “Pesky little buggers,” he said softly as he spun the plane and unloaded his machine gun in the dark, cold, rainy night. His path of fire swung far wide of the lower helicopter blasted headlong into the upper one, tearing off its rotor completely and sending it falling like a stone. It struck the one under it with a tearing, rending *CRRUNCH*, and the two mangled hunks of metal plummeted towards the rocky beach. Ace let out the breath he’d been holding and veered back in towards the island, and towards his ground targets.

Destro’s eyes were narrowed behind his helmet as he witnessed the aircraft exchanging violent blasting fire. He’d already counted four Mambas down to the Joes’ none, and it seemed that a third conflict that he couldn’t quite see was going down near the coast. And suddenly, there it was straight ahead; a lone white Skystriker humming under the cloud cover, it’s fuel tanks replaced by bomb racks, with no air cover in sight. He drew nearer and nearer, and slowly descended within firing range, Destro glaring at the cockpit, just imagining locking eyes with the cocky young man most assuredly behind the controls. He drew in a breath as he prepared to be swallowed by the roaring flames of the falling bombs.

“Destro!” the scream yanked him from his dream state. “Do you have a death wish?” The Baroness stood outside the HISS, drenched already from the pouring rain. The large man looked down, smiling softly.

“I stand my ground, dear Baroness. They will not get the Citadel while I live. If they want it, they’ll have to go through me.” He sat down at the turret of the HISS, flipping some quick switches and bringing up numerous LCD screens throughout the console. He wrapped two large, leather fists around the controls, squinting down into the monitors. His head rose slightly as he calculated range and velocity theories quickly in his head, bringing the power of the shells and the wind resistance into factor.

“Destro my dear! What are you doing?” The Baroness looked up at the sleek, white jet as it ripped through the sky down towards the valley.

“Standing my ground.” He hauled back on the triggers embedded in the twin levers of the turret and the barrels roared to life, blasting dark smoke and red flame in a sharp, straight arrow from the large round opening. The Baroness clapped both hands over her ears as Destro adjusted his aim and let loose again, the whole tank almost rocking with the force of the blasts.

“I’ve got you, Snakes…I’ve got you,” Ghostrider muttered, glaring into his display at the numerous ground targets reappearing in his monitors. He had the radar tuned to the special frequency, allowing the smart bombs to home in and strike even as he was pulling away. The Skystriker roared over the downward slope, not even seeing the small group of Joes waving from there as they chased off the nest of Cobras who had been hiding in the trees. Two sharp claps of thunder echoed in the valley, awfully low, and awfully loud, but expected in a rainstorm. His thumbs hovered over the releases as he suddenly realized that it wasn’t thunder. A pair of white/yellow streaks flashed above the valley, shot from below and drilled through the air right for him.

“Did a tank shoot that--?” he thought, but the thought was incomplete as the HISS shells pounded into the belly of the plane, rocking it like a small boat on rough seas. Ghostrider jerked in his pilot’s seat, and cracked his head on the inside of the canopy, then slumped over, his arm dangling so very close to the ejection lever. The second volley blasted into the right side of the white plane, tearing its wing to shreds and sending it in a wild, uncontrolled spin. At least Ghostrider was unconscious and did not witness his last moments of life as the X-14 plowed into the tall mountain behind the Citadel and blasted into hundreds of pieces, showering flaming debris over the large bunker and the HISS tanks below.

Slipstream kept the throttle down as another three Mambas formed on his tail, moving in, chin turrets roaring. He had taken out the last one that had him locked, but many more had taken its place and bore down on him with angry vengeance in mind. The Conquest swam through the air like a graceful fish in water, dipping in and out of paths of tracer fire, Slipstream dodging and weaving inside the cockpit in tune with the motion of the airplane. He swerved and banked, but the Mambas remained close behind, although thankfully he was moving too much for them to get a solid lock to use their missiles. Sparks glanced across his right wing as bullets thudded into the metallic surface, but with no serious damage done.

“Dang, man,” Slipstream said to no one in particular. “I may make this whole trip without popping a single flare or chaff!” He laughed at his little joke, when realization settled in, bringing a gentle, but malevolent smirk across his face. With an ease of the throttle, the Conquest slowed somewhat, the Mambas moving in closer behind. Suddenly, his threat indicator lit up again, but instead of moving he slammed his fist on the button marked “Counter Measures”. All at once, bright flares and steaming hot chaff exploded from the rear of the plane, meant to confuse missile radar and throw off heat seeking rockets. This time, they served another purpose by exploding and scattering blinding light across the cockpit of the center Mamba, washing over the stunned pilot inside.

“No—!” the Aero Viper shouted as his Mamba roared to the right on reflex, it’s propeller ripping through the metal fuselage of the battle copter right next to him. Jet fuel sprayed from the second Mamba just as another chaff burst from the Conquest, sparking brightly in the dark night. Slipstream punched his afterburners, tearing away from the three aircraft as a yellow fireball swallowed them whole. He adjusted his radar, and banked right, heading back towards the valley.

“Cover Girl’s safe!” Zap shouted in between heavy breaths as he ran up to Repeater, who was looking solemnly at the sky, specifically at the mountain that loomed behind the Citadel, on the west coast. “What’s eatin’ you?” he asked, bending down to scoop up Roadblock.

“One of the Skystrikers got slagged, man,” he said quietly, still looking. Zap’s shoulders slumped.

“Know whose?” he asked, not that it mattered.

“No…but there was no ejection. Just crash and burn.”

Zap shook his head sadly, and then snapped to attention, briskly saluting the smoldering mountainside. Repeater did the same, and then they bent and picked up their unconscious buddies, letting the silence speak for itself.

“C’mon!” Blackout shouted from inside the hold, his torch flaring and digging deep into the twisted plate metal of the crushed exit. A melted, fused line of molten steel followed the path of the torch down and around, but it was only about halfway there, and he knew they were out of second chances, especially when the second roar of a sonic boom echoed through the valley. He’d heard the first one and planned for the worst, but there were only a couple explosions, far away. He thought he knew what happened, and was upset at himself that he was actually a little relieved. Now, another roar shook the ground, and he wondered if this was it.

“Just a little further,” Ace said slowly, his eyes focused on the radar in front of him. A pair of light blips appeared suddenly, one a little below him and another further back. His mind raced. He was coming in over the treetops, from a way he figured they wouldn’t be looking. If they had any SAMs, or any air cover at all, he should come from the back of it, over the trees to the north and be there before they could do anything about it. It was a chance, but one he felt like he had to take. He hadn’t heard the confirmation from Two or Three yet, so he assumed the targets were still hot and he was ready to cool them off. The smaller blip suddenly moved in on his six, falling a little ways back, but Ace shut it out of his mind. He wasn’t going to get another chance; he had to take this one. Brisk claps of thunder exploded from below and he winced as the jet bucked wildly from the impact from below. The plane faltered, and Ace glanced out the side of his cockpit, immediately spotting the small black helicopter.

“A Fang, for crying out loud!” he shouted, the X-14 wobbling just slightly. His mind searched for solutions, wanting to turn back and smoke it, then resume. But the confrontation would be noticed. The surprise would be negated, and he couldn’t risk that. Another blast rocked the white plane and it lurched to the left, and then quickly compensated.

“At least he’s not using his rockets,” Ace muttered, but regretted even thinking it as the Fang drew back behind him, and his threat indicator blinked on.

“No, no, no…” he said quickly, but couldn’t avoid it any longer he grabbed the flight stick and prepared to bank…when the Fang exploded in a shattering blast of orange. Ace quickly kept the plane straight, but craned his neck back, seeing a faint shadow behind the gray cloud that hung in the air and the fluttering black debris. As is on cue, his radio crackled.

“One, this is Three, your six is clear,” Slipstream’s voice never sounded so good.

“Thanks buddy,” Ace replied, “just for that, I’ll let you deal.” The Skystriker accelerated, leaving the Conquest hanging behind for cover, and then suddenly he was there, over the trees, and approaching the valley, his ground radar lighting up with all the targets. Heavy fire exploded from down below him as the Stingers and HISS tanks fired hurriedly, desperately trying to take him out. His surprise ploy had worked, though, and they hadn’t expected the approach from this side and it was far too late for them to do anything. The white plane whizzed through the gunfire as if it was standing still and deftly swerved the red missiles as they blasted up into the heavens. His thumb flipped up a small lever and with a thin smile he punched down on the release, every muscle tensing. His ears perked for the noise and heard…nothing. He looked down at the stick, verifying the switch and punched the button again. Again, there was nothing. No whistle, no bang, no nothing.

“The Fang!” Ace shouted, almost slapping himself in the forehead. “It must have scorched the release when it hit me!” Desperation soaked into his body like a dripping sponge, and suddenly things got worse. His jet buckled and a small *BLAM* echoed from underneath. Something had given way and the Skystriker was plummeting fast. Ace scooped up the radio with a swift hand and flipped the button.

“One to Three…this is Ace! Slipstream, I have a malfunction, the bombs are *not* away! I have a fire in my undercarriage and am going down, please respond!” But there was no reply as the plane dipped and roared towards the wet muddy surface.

Slipstream cursed as he heard Ace’s message, but was not that far behind, and did not have time to confirm. The edge of the trees was coming up quick and his fingers danced over the controls, quickly shifting to the correct infrared frequency. The edge of the trees was there and his lightning quick reflexes moved to the flight stick, and smoothly flipped up the metal lid above the master switch. The green brown blur was over the valley now, going fast too fast but there was no choice he was the only one left who could and before his brain could even think it his thumb slammed down on the switch and he could hear the releases click open and the swift whistle of falling bombs.

“*BOMBS AWAY!*” he shouted, finally taking a breath and pulling the Conquest into a steep climb.

Repeater jogged hurriedly, the breath screaming from his lungs as he swerved around the heaping wreckage of the Mamba and dashed towards the trees and towards safety, which still seemed so far away. The Skystriker had screamed overhead, but had not dropped anything, and Repeater wondered what was going on, but not for long as the Conquest came up fast behind its buddy. He almost saw the racks of bombs as the plane whizzed overhead and was very quickly over the middle of the valley, where Stingers and HISSes sat, frantically firing at the speeding plane. The whistle immediately pierced the air, even over the sound of the slamming rainfall and Repeater’s turned into a frantic sprint, Gung Ho hanging loosely over one shoulder. The trees were closer, but were they close enough? He had no idea, and could only hope as he threw himself forward towards the running figure of Zap just ahead. The sound was deafening, a blistering, shattering, deep rumbling growl; it started off guttural, but as if clearing its voice it became a sharp, forceful, slamming blast. The hard dirt and solid earth beneath gave way under the punishing assault of the numerous cluster bombs as they detonated in a white-hot mountain sized explosion. Repeater and Zap could only close their eyes as they felt the wave of heat rushing at their backs.

“I’m through!” Blackout shouted happily as the door creaked with a rending tear and gave way, slamming to the hard dirt, now covered by a few inch layer of mushy wetness. Mud splattered in an arc around the large hunk of metal as it crashed to the ground. Hawk looked up, and saw the green/brown Conquest streaking in, small cylinders visible under the glaring halogen lamps. They tumbled clumsily through empty space towards the ground and vehicles below, almost like they were floating through space. Hawk spun around, squinting in the dark and spotted the trees, many, many feet away. Far too far. His mind raced as the bombs dropped and he gave one frantic, loud, chilling order.

“*EVERYONE INSIDE THE WHALE NOW!!!!*” They poured into the vehicle and crouched down as the world blew apart around them.

“C’mon, baby,” Ace pleaded to his beloved Skystriker as it threatened to shake apart under his tight control. It trembled and shuddered through the air and Ace spotted what was quite simply the most beautiful thing he’d seen in a long, long time. The asphalt was cracked and broken, there were no flagmen, no whole towers, but it was a runway, all the same. Cobra or not, an airfield was an airfield. With a twist of the wrist, he banked the plane wide to the right, and then guided it to a shuddering, violent halt on the cracked and broken runway, easing it to a full stop, with no damage done. Even as he vaulted from the cockpit, shadowed figures dashed towards him, weapons at the ready and shouting. Ace couldn’t hear them behind the rumbling thunder of the bombs, but raised his hands, ready to become a Cobra prisoner.

# CHAPTER FIVE

**Scores To Settle**

Destro could not believe it. Even as his mind was denying and trying to explain rational reasons for why this simply was *not* happening, his body was tensing and prepared for the coming shock. His eyes were wide in disbelief as the cannons roared around him, but the white plane had slipped right through their fire; and dropped nothing. His hopes soared for one brief moment thinking that they may have done something; that somehow they had squeezed a victory out of the crazed, impossibly unlucky chain of events that were the last hour of time. But then came the green plane. Like a bolt of olive drab lightning it streaked from the trees, it’s engines roaring a deafening, shuddering thunder, but no thunder compared to what was echoing around the Cobra second in command at this moment. His whole world; whole *universe* was flying debris, chunks of earth, roars of blinding flame, and a choking gray/black cloud of thick smoke, washing over everything as it rippled slowly outwards from the point of contact. Destro’s eyes widened even more as the cylinders tumbled through the air, falling lightly. His hopes rose again as they spun and fell, but they were coasting towards the trees; they were falling off their mark. It had indeed seemed like the torrential, typhoon-like rains and the gale force winds had worked in the favor of Cobra; Mother Nature herself intervening on their behalf. But again, halfway through the bombs’ decent they suddenly shifted, scattered and became little homing projectiles shooting straight for certain spots on the ground; in the valley, in the midst of the Cobra Army’s formation.

*How?* Destro’s always-rational mind demanded. *They must be smart bombs, but where are their spotters?* Again he tried to will away the events based on his calm, rational denial of them, but now he could no longer deny it. Now the evidence was roaring high into the dark, night sky while gray/black nothing shot straight at him, followed closely by a bright wave of rolling flame. Suddenly, quite suddenly Destro wasn’t so sure about his policy of holding his ground, and defending the Citadel with his life. He closed his eyes and winced as a rush of smoke washed over him, making him gag and cough, making his once wide open eyes sting and water. He stared down at the ground, seeing the Baroness crawling for cover as the same thick cloud washed over her as well. Suddenly, the HISS was airborne, pushed along by a powerful, but invisible force, and it hovered there for a second and then went slamming to the ground, throwing Destro from its turret like a cowboy thrown from his rodeo horse. He hit the ground just next to his beloved Baroness and they rolled together as the large black tank pounded into the ground just behind them and rested still, small puffs of smoke and scattering of black debris falling around them.

“Stay close to the ground, beloved!” Destro shouted above the thunderous roar, which had quite completely blocked out the sound of the raging storm that had been in the heavens above. They hugged the wet earth as the wall of flame and bursts of forceful light crashed against the HISS, knocking it into a violent shudder, but keeping it on its side. The two Cobras huddled behind it, as the explosions blasted around them, flames roaring just over them roaring just over them and to each side, narrowly blocked by the fallen tank. Debris clanged against its thick metal hide and shredded island pelted the two as the say there, their heads lowered and their muscles tensed. Just as it seemed the noise was letting up, another sharp *BANG* would echo followed by more flame and flying debris. Destro and his love sat amidst the inferno, quite certain that this was their last hour on earth.

“Lower your hands, you moron!” the shout came from the shadowed figures, and Ace had to think twice before complying. The shadow melted away and the figure came into half view, still obscured by the thick clouds above, although the raging explosions about a mile away were casting an ambient glow over the entire airstrip. Ace smiled when the face was finally exposed.

“Stalker! What are you doing out here? Aren’t you supposed to be inside?” he pointed to the Citadel, his face confused.

“Well, we came out here to tell Hawk’s team that the radar was down.” He looked over at the valley, which was still roaring with the flames of Hades itself. “I guess you got the point, though, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s for sure,” Ace replied ducking slightly as the Conquest screamed overhead, then banked and hit the runway with a sharp squeal and screeching halt. The rest of the group approached behind Stalker, some of them looking fearfully solemn. The red haired pilot walked over to Duke first, who still leaned on Claymore for support, his face a puffy mess, but with an even worse expression.

“What’s the matter, Top?” Ace asked, walking over to the limping Sergeant.

“I think General Hawk’s team was still in the valley, flyboy. When the bombs hit.” His face was ashen and cold dead serious. Ace lowered his head and sighed deeply.

“No.” It was all he could think to say, more of a plea to some higher power than an expression of disbelief.

“Another thing, son,” Duke said softly, putting a hand on the pilot’s shoulder. “You lost one bud. One of the ‘Striker’s got hit…he crashed and burned, no eject.” He pointed to the ragged mountain just behind the Citadel, way off in the distance. Ace could only imagine the white debris of a destroyed Skystriker there; it was far too far away for him to see anything. Slipstream approached from behind, hearing the little speech.

“Two?” he asked moving into the small group, looking at the mountain. “Two bought the farm?…Two…two?…for crying out loud, I can’t even remember the guys damn name!” he shouted, disgusted with himself.

“Jeffries, Jonas S. Colonel. 112-30-7140, Code Name: Ghostrider,” Ace said solemnly looking towards the mountain. He snapped off a stiff salute, and lowered it, clearing his voice. “Don’t worry, Slipstream,” Ace said, slapping the man on the shoulder. “He’d have been offended if you *had* remembered his name.” He turned towards Duke, his face stern and mean. “All right, Top, what’s the plan? I may be a flyboy, but I can ground pound and shoot with the best of them. I aim to get me some payback.”

Duke grinned and held up a calming hand. “Relax for just a second, Ace. I think our first objective is to find out if our boys are still in the valley. From there on, we’ll play it by ear.”

Ace nodded a surface nod, while inside he yearned for something to shoot at.

“Hello?” Its own echo, but nothing else greeted the small voice. “Anyone alive in there?” The voice would have been loud and roaring, but through the steel of the hold, it was quite muffled and almost inaudible. Two quick raps clanged through the hold and Hawk sat straight up, almost knocking his head on the hold ceiling. Or was it the floor? Or the wall? The General couldn’t tell, he just knew his muscles were screaming and his ears were ringing. The last thing he remembered was shoving everyone inside the Whale, and then the Earth itself opened up and sprayed fire over the valley, sending the hovercraft rolling clumsily along. His ears still hummed softly from the punishing roars of dropping bombs, but he could hear a little bit, and definitely heard that rapid pounding on the side of the craft. He had no idea how long he’d been out, but there were no more slamming explosions, just a low growl of roaring, crackling flame.

“Hello?” this time the voice was much louder and he whirled around, seeing a round dark head peering inside the opening of the hold that Blackout had burnt through. His vision cleared and focused through a red haze and finally saw Airtight as he slowly crawled through the tight opening, which was now almost flush with the ground. Hawk finally realized that the Whale was upside-down.

“Airtight?” he mumbled, his voice choking slightly from the cloud of smoke that still hung in the air. Around the General, more bodies stirred slightly as if waking from a deep slumber.

The green helmeted head turned from the opening and shouted up the slope. “They’re okay! C’mon, let’s get them out of there!”

Hawk’s hearing cleared a little more and he could still hear the crashing of the rain on the ground outside, and a stream of dirty water ran into the Whale, collecting just below him. In seconds they were inside, reaching and pulling and grabbing and freeing, Hawk’s head still in a minor daze.

Roadblock’s face lit up in a smile when he spotted the men milling around and moving next to the capsized hovercraft. The big man could only fill in the blanks in his memory, but he remembered almost getting creamed by a falling Mamba, and then he woke up, surrounded by his fallen teammates, the valley awash in flame and smoke. He picked up the pace as much as he could with Zap and Gung Ho draped over his large, broad shoulders. Behind him Repeater jogged slowly, with Cover Girl draped over his.

“I think they’re all right, man!” Roadblock shouted, craning his neck back to yell to his teammate. Repeater said nothing, just continuing on behind him.

“I see movement, Duke!” Hit & Run shouted, dropping the binoculars from his eyes and shouting excitedly to the men limping slowly behind him.

Duke smiled through his swollen, beaten face, his shoulder suddenly starting to throb in agony. The pain had subsided somewhat while the mission was on, the adrenaline keeping him going, but now…he saw that everything seemed to be coming together, and once again a searing white arrow seemed to be drilling through his collarbone, and melting burning acid throughout his chest. He groaned, coughed haggardly and stumbled, Claymore bending over quickly to keep him upright. Behind him Falcon carried Muskrat who still hadn’t regained consciousness and Rotor Viper, Recondo, Stalker and Wet Suit followed near behind, looking serious, but inwardly relieved at the same time. Moments later, they joined their comrades, each small group filling the other in on the details of the numerous past hours.

“No! No, no, no!” Cobra Commander screamed angrily, his fist waving in the air. He sat up from his desk with a raging shove, knocking his red chair over and spilling a snake-mug full of pencils onto the floor. “This is intolerable! What happened to our radar? What happened to our Mambas? *What happened to the plan????*” His eyes were raging and bulging, each man in the large room, backing down slightly except for the two Immortals who stood their ground at his flank. “You there, who are you?” he demanded, thrusting a black gloved finger at the young Viper before him.

“Viper Satchel, sir!” he replied happily.

Cobra Commander looked enraged. “Not your name, idiot! What number are you?”

“Viper Eight-Three Seven,” he stammered nervously.

“Very good, Eight-Three-Seven…I want to you set up a strong hold on the bottom level of this Citadel! Sandbags, heavy machine guns, all the Vipers you can gather together, understood?”

“Y—yes, sir,” Satchel replied, sweat building at his brow, underneath the silver faceplate.

“Well get to it!” Cobra Commander spun, waving an irritated hand and Satchel lowered his head apologetically and swept out the door, the other two Vipers close behind.

“He put you in charge, kid?” the large, dark skinned Viper asked beside him.

“I don’t know why Rhames…but he did. And I’m going to make him glad he did!” he shouted confidently. “My name will be on the monument in Washington, D.C. where my parents can see it and be proud of their only son.”

Rhames smiled beneath his mirrored mask. “All right, kid. Lead ahead.”

Moments had passed, the team finally reunited, discussing battle plans and strategies. Lifeline hovered over the row of wounded a few yards behind the group of Joes. He checked out Duke, Muskrat, Gung Ho, Zap, Cover Girl, Outback, Spearhead, Bazooka, Topside, Cutter, and Clutch with a doctor’s diligence and attention to detail. He dressed their wounds, administered painkillers and wrapped everything up in tight, smooth bandages, making sure all were comfortable under the limited shelter of a hastily constructed shelter from trees and thin slabs of scrap metal strewn all over the ground. Some distance away, Scrap Iron and Vypra stood firm and uncomfortable under the careful watch of Joe guards. The rain still slammed down around them all. Over by the group, Leatherneck’s eyes lit up when he saw Wet Suit approached and gave him a firm, solid handshake.

“Once again, the Jarhead’s gotta bail you out, Frogman!” he shouted gruffly, but happily, Wet Suit returning the expression.

“Claymore, how are you doing?” Leatherneck asked, turning to the man in camouflage. Dial Tone joined the two men and slapped Claymore on the shoulder, grinning.

“Good to see you again, buddy,” he said, Claymore looking kind of embarrassed by the attention.

“For crying out loud!” came a voice from over under the ragged shelter. The men looked over and Duke was propped up on his elbows witnessing the whole thing. “I’m I the only one who doesn’t know this guy?” he waved a hand towards Claymore and shook his head.

“Sorry, Duke,” Dial Tone replied chuckling. “We were on a special mission together in—“

“Yeah, let me guess…in Brazil, right?”

“Yup.” Leatherneck replied, nodding. Duke shrugged and lay back down, adjusting the large white bandage wrapped around half of his chest and shoulder.

“So, Stalker,” Hawk said, drawing closer to the Ranger and letting the other Joes converse among themselves. “How did you guys get out of the prison?”

Stalker shook his head almost as if he didn’t believe it, even though he had seen it himself. “Believe it or not, you can thank Flint for that,” he said gesturing back behind him.

Hawk’s eyes sprang open in surprise as he looked back where Stalker was signaling. “Only person I see there is that Rotor Viper you were telling me about.”

Stalker whirled around, and sure enough, Flint had somehow vanished in the confusion. Stalker shook his bloodied head and coughed suddenly.

“Hey, maybe Lifeline should take a look at you,” Hawk said, almost sternly.

“I’m fi—“ Stalker started to say, but Hawk interrupted.

“Consider it an order, troop.”

Stalker sighed. “Yes, sir,” he said and turned to walk towards the medic, trying desperately to hide the slight limp in his walk.

“All right, Joes, gather around!” Hawk shouted, waving everyone into a small circle. As Lifeline tended to the Army Ranger, Stalker kept a close eye, and his rifle, trained on the Cobra prisoners so that the small group guarding them could hear Hawk’s words of encouragement.

 “We scored a major victory here already, but the fight is far from over, understood?” As he spoke, his eyes roamed over the wasteland that was once the valley. Every HISS tank and Stinger that had been inside was a crumpled, smoking ruin and Cobra Blue colored bodies littered the landscape. Gray suited Stinger Drivers and red suited Track Vipers mingled among them, either sprawled in the dirt, or slumped over in the cockpit or driver’s seat. It was carnage, plain and simple, and as many times as Hawk saw it, it still put a knot in his stomach and a heavy weight on his conscience.

“Rotor Viper?” Hawk asked, signaling to the blue suited man in the crowd. He stepped forward somewhat uneasily, but received no harsh looks or mean comments.

“Yes, sir?” he asked softly,

“Stalker has told me of your services, son. First of all, thank you. When we return from this operation, I hope you will think to enlist in the armed services. It would be my pleasure to have you serve on this team some day.”

“T..thank you, sir.” It was obviously not the reaction he had been expecting.

“But for now, your knowledge as a Cobra agent will prove invaluable. You have been briefed on the weapon, Code Name: SuperFreak, yes?” he asked.

Mike, the Rotor Viper nodded. “Yes, sir. Stalker told me all about it on our way out of the complex, sir.”

“Good. I need you to tell me where I would find such an item inside the complex, troop.”

“My first guess would be Mindbender’s lab, sir. He and Destro do most of their work down there.”

 “Good. That will be the first team’s target. Volunteers?”

Wet Suit immediately stepped forward, his face mean and cold as ever. “Me, sir.”

“Wet Suit, are you sure you’re up to it, troop?”

“Sir, with all due respect, a bunch of Mindbender’s little guinea pigs took out my whole S.E.A.L. squad. I want to get me some payback, sir.”

“Good enough, troop. You’re the squad leader for this little expedition. Rotor Viper, I want you to go with him, to show him the quickest way to get there. Can you handle that?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Good. Airtight, you’ll be going with them. If the device is there, I need someone with some science savvy down there to tinker with it.”

“Yes, sir,” Airtight replied quickly and joined the other two. Wet Suit nodded to him, running a hand over the two MP5’s still strapped to his broad shoulders.

“Dismissed, troops,” Hawk nodded to the three men, who snapped off salutes and ran off into the dark night, Rotor Viper leading the way, his AK-47 held out in front of him.

“All right. Now for the fun stuff,” Hawk said, but his face looked far from fun. “We’re going to strike at the heart of this snake, troops. Our target is there, learn it and love it.” He pointed a firm finger back, straight towards the large, looming concrete Citadel. The large carved Cobra emblem seemed to mock them from underneath the rectangular window above. “If I know Cobra Commander, he is reforming whatever is left of his troops into a blockade at the Citadel, with him sitting pretty at the top. It is my understanding that the strike team swept the whole complex, and that is the only place he could have retreated to.”

The Joes all kept their eyes locked on their leader, all standing at stone solid attention.

“The rest of us will have to move quickly…hit them hard and fast, before they know what to do.”

“Um, sir?” a sheepish voice called from the crowd. It was Dial Tone.

“What is it, troop?” Hawk asked.

“Ripcord’s on the horn sir, he wants to talk to the group.”

“Put him through,” Hawk said. There was a crackle and soon Ripcord’s voice broadcast from the large speaker on the back of Dial Tone’s backpack.

“Joes! We finally got to a radio! Everyone keep an eye to the sky, you have serious aircraft moving in!”

The Joes glanced around, trying to suppress amused chuckles.

“Too late for that, ‘Cord!” Ace shouted at the radio. “They came, we saw and we kicked their tails!”

“Ace?” Ripcord asked, his voice crackling through the speaker. “All right, the flyboys made it!” he shouted to someone else on his end, who shouted happily. Hit & Run smiled at the sound of Beachhead’s voice. “Hey, Ace! I hope you crammed a sidewinder up Wild Weasel’s exhaust for me!”

“Wild Weasel?” Ace asked, drawing closer to the radio.

“Yeah! He took off in a Rattler like a bat outta hell! You didn’t see him?”

Ace’s eyes grew wide as he looked over at Hawk.

“He wasn’t in the air?” Hawk asked solemnly.

“No, sir. There were only Mambas, General, I’m *sure* of it.”

“Then he’s---“

“---Got the device!” shouted Ace, already breaking into a full run, back towards the airfield. Slipstream broke off from the group and dashed after him, arms and legs pumping fast. Hawk lowered his head.

“They launched it…they really did it,” he whispered softly, but his look of concern almost immediately hardened to a cold, mean glare. “Men. As of now, this is war, understand me?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Whether or not the weapon hits our country, we *must* take Cobra down. We *must* take Cobra Commander out tonight. He is the heart and blood of this evil empire, if we cut him out, the empire will die, plain and simple. I hope no one is feeling squeamish, because there is only one objective as far as I am concerned. Cobra Commander himself.”

“*YES, SIR!*” If anyone was squeamish, they hid it well, shouting with an unbridled enthusiasm.

“This is the breakdown. Lifeline and the wounded stay here. Those who can stand will guard the prisoners. I want to hear *no* arguments and *no* refusals, Joes, do you hear me?”

“SIR!”

“Repeater, Claymore, Torpedo, and Bullhorn, you stay with the wounded. Form a perimeter guard, make sure there are no loose snakes running around with vengeance in their minds, got it?”

“Yes, sir!” the four men tried to sound enthusiastic, but everyone could tell they were disappointed.

“Everyone else converge on me, we’re going in, got it?” he walked away, towards the Citadel, the men on his heels, swiftly scooping up their weapons and following Hawk, who was barking orders even as he walked. “Low Light, you’re our night spotter and sniper, set up camp in the valley and back us up!”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Alpine, Hit & Run, Recondo, and Falcon, you are the attack squad! I want you four to charge ahead, guns blazing and clear us an entrance! Once we enter the Citadel, Alpine and Hit & Run will cover the outside while Recondo and Falcon hang back and cover our flank!”

“Yes, sir!”

“The rest of you are with me in the strike force. Roadblock, you’re our heavy gunner, Leatherneck, Shockwave, and Kevlar you’re the foot troops! Dial Tone and Blackout you are communications and technology. If there’s any way to diffuse this thing, if it is indeed still in the Commander’s office, it is up to *you*.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Let’s do this! Yo JOE!!!”

“*YO JOE!!!*”

Wet Suit dropped into the large chamber below, landing in a low, graceful crouch, one of his MP5’s raised and trained on the dim hallway.

“Clear!” he shouted in a harsh whisper. Behind him Airtight dropped down, stumbling slightly but regaining his balance. Rotor Viper hit the floor next and rolled to his feet. Wet Suit recognized it as the main hallway they had been in mere hours ago, the Vipers still strewn about the floor and bullet holes still littered the walls.

“That was a heck of a lot easier than getting out,” he muttered, shuffling forward. Rotor Viper nodded.

“Well, it’s a lot easier to drop ten feet than to jump ten feet.” He said bringing his AK up into firing position.

Airtight glanced down at his readings, which showed little.

“Hallway’s down there,” the Rotor Viper pointed towards a branching hall, across from where they had exited from the prison. The complex was strangely silent, like a huge, cavernous tomb, the echoes of gunfire long since faded and the shouts of troops lost in the smooth walls. Wet Suit nodded, shuffling forward slowly, inching around the bend. The hallway was clear, and he waved his buddies forward. They joined him swiftly and they entered the branching hall, hearts throbbing in their throats. The hallway was short and opened into an enormous facility, a huge, looming mountain of a room, the catwalk they ended up on wrapping around one corner and leading to an elevator at the end of the concrete walkway with the metal railing. Wet Suit glanced down at the room, and looked around, noting the wooden stage and curtain rigging, the podium and the low hanging velvet flags emblazoned with the toothy grin he’d come to loathe.

“I thought this was a training room,” he muttered to the Rotor Viper as they walked along the catwalk.

“It was. Looks like there was some kind of rally,” Mike replied, squinting down into the room. “Doesn’t surprise me.” Airtight looked throughout the room and checked his readings again, but found nothing mysterious. Minutes later they were at the elevator and inside, Rotor Viper quickly scanning over the console. With a light press he shoved in the button marked ‘L’ and the elevator slowly descended.

“All right, what’s the plan, Wet Suit?” Airtight asked, loading a clip into the nine-millimeter weapon built into his “Sniffer”.

“I’ll let you know when the shooting starts,” Wet Suit said, only half joking as the elevator door swung slowly open, the Navy S.E.A.L. drawing in a deep, disturbed breath. There they were, standing over by the monitors, oblivious to their presence. Two of them only, but two more than Wet Suit expected to see, they were obviously concentrating on the read outs in front of them. Wet Suit swung himself back in the elevator, letting the door ease, but not slam closed. He flipped the stop switch and was breathing hard. He was now certain that throughout his whole life he would never forget the uniform…the evil, grating voice…and the slick silence that seemed to follow them. The Shadow Vipers would undoubtedly haunt his dreams for life. But he would not back down. There had only been two of them, he wasn’t sure where the others were, but he had seen the whole lab from the elevator. The long, narrow clear passage on the left of the looming glass, human sized test tubes, which took up most of the rest of the room. There were a couple of feet of blank space between the elevator and the machinery and he had spotted a circuit breaker off to the left, behind another set of tall, sophisticated looking computer banks. Again, his mind told him there were only two, and their helmets were off, blood-red facemasks pulled tightly over their heads. In a small way, he was happy the helmets were off, those deep red eyes, and evil rasping breathy voices cancelled out for at least a moment.

“Wet Suit?” the low voice forced his head to spin. He hadn’t noticed but he was sweating profusely and his side suddenly throbbed with a dull ache. Airtight leaned in close to check out his comrade. “You okay, buddy?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, just honky dory,” Wet Suit replied evenly, his eyes darting towards the elevator door. “All right, boys, listen up, because I only want to say this once. These boys are fast and deadly, a very dangerous combination. Their suits are stealth capable, but only against electronic detection, although they do emit this strange “field of silence” meaning we can’t hear them do jack.” He spoke with calm seriousness, looking each man in the eyes. “Right now they’re not wearing their helmets, which can work to our advantage. We’ll show them what stealth is really all about.” His glare was turning narrow and mean as he looked Airtight right in the eyes. “Airtight, I want you go left as soon as the door opens and go straight to the circuit breaker. Don’t wait for my order, as soon as you get there, cut the lights.”

“Got it,” Airtight said, nodding.

“With their helmets, these boys can see in the dark better than I can see at high noon, so we’ve got to move fast so they don’t have a chance to put them on.”

The other two men nodded.

“Now, Mike, you’re my cover man. I want you to hold ground in the elevator, using it as cover. Once the power is cut, the elevator won’t run, so you’ll be safe here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir. I’m going straight in and to the right, using the machinery as cover. When the power is cut, I’m going in hard and fast.”

The other men’s eyes confirmed their understanding.

“All right. On three, I pop the doors, and we’re on.” Wet Suit lifted one of his MP5’s, leaving the other one dangling while his finger probed for the button. “One.” His muscles tensed, his face narrowed, his eyes squinting tightly closed. “Two.” His eyes eased open slightly and his fingers drummed nervously against the handle and trigger of the automatic. “*THREE!*” His finger pounded the button, the door slid open and they went into action. Wet Suit dropped low and raised both automatics simultaneously, charging forward with the power and grace of an Olympic athlete. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the yellow-garbed Joe break out and dash the other way. The Shadow Vipers whirled with the sound of their boots slamming against the lab floor, and their eyes grew wide behind the smooth red masks. Wet Suit grinned happily at their shock, pleased to be returning the favor. Unaware that he was shouting, the Navy S.E.A.L. hauled down on both triggers of the H & K’s his arms thrashing while the guns jumped in his hands, spraying sparks and smoke down the narrow empty passage between the large tubes and the monitoring devices. The lead Shadow Viper broke off and dove to his left while the second one took the full brunt of twin Heckler & Koch submachine guns, thrashing and stumbling like a seizing drunkard. He fell, but shot out a single arm, catching himself on the elaborate computer banks behind him, and remained standing. With a grunt he swung his large weapon hanging by his side up and around, his face twisting in a look of rage. The S.E.A.L. dropped and rolled as the huge barrel exploded in a wild, blinding fury, his arm holding it stock still and walking the large bore path of deadly lead along the back wall. Large, jagged chunks of wall blasted apart under the assault, showering Wet Suit with sparks and debris as he scrambled for cover. Three solid shots slammed into the console he finally found refuge behind, rocking the whole monitor on its foundation and pounding massive holes in the metal and computer components. Wet Suit had forgotten exactly how powerful their personal arsenal was. And then the lights were out, and the lab was plunged into darkness. The gunfire stopped suddenly as black swallowed the room whole, shutting out all sources of light. Wet Suit shuddered slightly as he sat there crouched behind the console, his head mere inches below the top of the computer, which was already sparking slightly from the Shadow Viper’s roaring gunfire. The gun which was as powerful as rifle as he had ever seen, and yet made no noise whatsoever despite the huge gluts of flame and sparks which blasted from the barrel. It was an unnerving experience as was sitting here with them in pitch-blackness. But the Shadow Vipers were obviously equally unnerved as their shooting had instantly halted, the men obviously searching for a way to solve this new problem.

“What’s the matter, boys?” Wet Suit couldn’t help but shout. “Your untrained eyes not used to the dark?” He was answered by a thundering strobe of quick flashes, and the scream and slam of large bullets striking the walls around him. “Technology doesn’t mean crap without the basic training behind it, Snakes!” he whipped back around the computers, crouching low and roared off a quick series of flashing shots, which did make noise, even with the slender black silencers screwed on. As if taking the cue, another barrage of quick flashes and chopping thunder erupted from the elevator, Rotor Viper’s unsilenced AK-47 barking loudly. Sparks spun from the computer banks behind the pair of Cobra’s, illuminating their little corner of the room, and sending them scattering. Glass sprayed from the popped monitors, but strangely, made no sound when it landed at the feet of the black clad Cobra’s. Wet Suit figured he would never get used to that. Return fire sprayed quickly and abruptly, slamming into the elevator car and tearing up the metal console that Wet Suit crouched low behind, his head ducking down to avoid the whipping shrapnel and bright sparks. He blinked his eyes somewhat, happy to realize that his vision was adjusting to the darkness. Was theirs? For some reason, the Joe didn’t think so. Wet Suit decided that it was time to end this little battle and ran his hand over the web belt wrapped tightly around his waist. Within seconds, the eager, roaming hand closed around the small green grenade, feeling like a cold drink of water after weeks in the desert. Wet Suit eased his head up and over the bank of computer and froze, his blurry vision picking up a disturbing scene. The lead Shadow Viper approached the bank of computers on the other side of the room slowly, but methodically, reaching out with his free hand, groping for the counter. Yes, his eyes were definitely still unaccustomed to the darkness, but in another few inches, that would change. His helmet laid there, the dim eyes staring out at the S.E.A.L. as if the helmet itself was alive. With a deep breath, Wet Suit bounded straight up right, tossing the pin to the hard floor, cocked his arm and whipped it forward like a fastball pitcher. He was greeted with swift fire, and he dropped to the floor, covering his head.

“*Fire in the hole!!*” he screamed as a warning to his teammates. The grenade struck the wall with a low *clunk* and then fell silent, which was good news to the Joe, meaning it must have fallen close to the Shadow Vipers. A blinding flash burst suddenly from the center of the room, throwing fragmentation and shrapnel in a wide arc. It made no noise, but was just as destructive, tearing through metal, glass, flesh and bone with equal ferocity and devastation. The light faded almost as quickly as it had bloomed, releasing a belch of gray smoke and smashing debris into the surrounding walls. Wet Suit cheered to himself, standing up in a low crouch, still behind the monitor. The bright flash left a lasting soft light floating through the lab and he could see relatively clearly as he came around the computer bank and stopped abruptly, looking at the destruction with a warped satisfaction. There was a twisted, crumpled heap on the floor, which had been almost human once, but he didn’t feel even an ounce of regret as he shuffled forward to further investigate the destruction.

“That was for Team One, scumbags,” he whispered as he walked, but then stopped cold. He had whispered. Spoken. He knew he had.

But no sound had come out.

No sound…no sound? How can—

Realization settled in like a quick punch and the S.E.A.L. whipped around, facing up towards the ceiling, not hearing anything, not seeing anything, but *sensing* something looming above him in the darkness. The blood red pair of deep dark eyes glared down on him like a predator, boring deep, deep into his soul. His heart pounded in his tight chest as he lifted his machine gun, but the person…no, the *creature* was far too fast. Wet Suit couldn’t think of the Shadow Viper as human…it was an inhuman machine. A *thing* born and bred simply to kill. His breath flew from his tightly closed lips as the massive weight slammed into him in a full-on body tackle, throwing him roughly to the floor, and landing on top of him. *How?* Wet Suit’s mind struggled. *He got his helmet on and jumped to the top of a test tube? Just in the time it took me to throw a grenade? No one…nothing is that fast!* But it had been, and now it was on him, pinning his back to the smooth laboratory floor. His massive, black leather forearm pressed tightly against the S.E.A.L.’s throat as his other hand flipped a switch on his metal, circular belt. Suddenly, sound filtered immediately in, and the first thing he heard was the throaty, rasping breath of his attacker coming down on him, warm and wet, and nauseatingly sour. The pressure increased, and Wet Suit’s breath wouldn’t come, his eyes wide and searching for a way out. His fingers groped and searched, but the weapons weren’t anywhere near his reaching grasp. Struggling for voice, his vision was already clouding over as the blood red eyes glared down at him without emotion, without pity.

*M…Mike…Rotor Viper…Airtight…som…someone…* his mind formed the words that his mouth couldn’t speak, not just yet.

“Well, well,” the echoing, gravelly voice rasped from behind the cold black helmet. “Hmmm, I wonder if your head will pop like the other one did.” The helmeted head cocked slightly to one side inquisitively. His voice was low and choking, yet had a high wheezing twang to it. The sound of complete insanity.

 “You know…the one I shot in the head. Popped like a pimple, his head did.” The laugh was a dead sound. An emotionless chuckle…laughing because it thought it was supposed to, not because there was any emotion. But whatever emotion was lacking in the large black clad man surged through Wet Suit’s body, the adrenaline screaming through the fibers in his arms. He drew in a deep breath and twisted, releasing the pressing arm just enough to shout.

“Airtight! Hit the lights!”

His air was caught off again instantly as the Snake shifted and pressed back down on him, anger flaring in his eyes behind the red, illuminated lenses. Like a sign from above, the florescent lights in thee even rows across the ceiling all ignited at once in an almost forceful *SNAP!* The Shadow Viper winced as if in physical pain, his hands shooting to the large red eyes on his helmet.

“AARRRGHHHHH!” he screamed, clutching at his face. “My *eyes!*” Wet Suit bent his knees tight to his chin, and then thrust out, sending the large man soaring backwards. He stumbled back, hands waving, the sudden bright light far more than blinding to one mentally in tune with such a sensitive night vision helmet. He stumbled back, catching himself with one hand against the computer terminals just under the large test tubes behind him, his chest heaving rapidly, his hands groping. Wet Suit stood quickly, scooping up his MP5 and moved in. With a forceful, angry swipe, he brought the automatic crashing against the Shadow Viper’s thickly helmeted head. The head whipped violently to the side, throwing the black helmet across the still smoke filled room until it rolled to a halt at the base of the computer terminals against the back wall. The Navy S.E.A.L. stopped his arm in full extension, then whipped it back the other way, slamming the Shadow Viper in the right temple with the heavy metal weapon, sending him sprawling. The Shadow Viper half stumbled and fell to his knees, his arms reaching until they finally closed around Wet Suit’s other MP5, completely by luck. A malevolent grin spread over the masked man’s face as he whipped around, the MP5 barking loudly, with his silenced field no longer on. Wet Suit slid smoothly to one side, lifting his own automatic, his eyes narrowed into slits, piercing at the kneeling Cobra.

“This is for Tracker, you sick son of a b—“ his sentence was interrupted by the roar of his own machine gun, slightly silenced by the thin tube, but after so much use, the silencer was less than effective at this point. But that did not matter. Sparks shot from the barrel in gasping spurts, flying through the air and meshing with the sparks dancing over the body armor of the Shadow Viper. He shook and thrashed wildly under the assault until a bullet plowed head long into his forehead. With a violent shudder, his eyes shot open, the white films quivering, his faded pupils desperately trying to focus. A low grunt and growl trembled deep in his throat, trying to form some last defiant word…a final curse on the Navy S.E.A.L. His mouth moved underneath the red cloth mask, but no sound came out, when finally his eyes rolled and he pitched slightly, then slammed back first on the smooth laboratory floor and lay still, his blinded, white pupils staring aimlessly to the ceiling. Wet Suit picked himself up off the floor, groaning slightly and breathing in ragged gasps.

“Wet Suit!” Airtight shouted, running over to the S.E.A.L. “You gonna make it?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, man…I---oh, man.”

Airtight spun around as he heard the Navy man’s expression and saw what he saw. Inside the elevator, the young man was sprawled, head to one side, the whole elevator sprayed in a light crimson.

“Mike!” Airtight bolted for the elevator and kneeled down next to the Rotor Viper, placing his hand at the man’s throat, pleading for some kind of reaction. There was none, and Wet Suit had known that there wouldn’t be the moment he saw the body. He chided himself for thinking bad about the boy for not giving him the cover he needed.

“C’mon, Airtight, man,” Wet Suit said, gripping his shoulder. “I know it sucks, but we got work to do, buddy.”

Airtight hung his head low, glaring at the blank expression on the former Cobra’s face. “Yeah, I know, Wet Suit. Let’s get to it, huh?” he stood slowly and walked back into the lab, Wet Suit right on his heels.

The sleek white jet streaked through the dark night, its engines roaring a white hot flame, it’s pointed wings tucked tightly to its slender white frame. It roared with an agile quickness, dropping to wave top level, skimming, and then climbing once again. Right behind it, another plane followed, close behind but dropped back into formation. When the lead plane dipped, the rear one climbed and vice versa. They were sweeping…scanning as much ground as possible in as little time as possible. And the man watching them knew exactly what they were looking for. It was his job to make sure they didn’t find it.

“Air Snake One to Air Snake Four, respond.”

“This is Four…go ahead, A.V.A.C. One.”

The silver helmeted pilot twisted his head to get a better glance out of the side of his narrow, sleek canopy, which matched the svelte curved surface of the rest of the small plane he flew. He skimmed just at wave level and in their blind spot where he could see them, but they couldn’t see him. Besides, it wasn’t him they were looking for. With any luck they had their radar tuned for the Rattler. His tiny single engine could just sneak right in and swat them.

“I have them in sight. I am progressing to phase two.”

“Excellent. I have your position, One.”

“Good converge on my coordinates, and then we attack!”

“They won’t even know what hit them.”

AVAC One sneered behind his fancy angular chrome helmet with built in oxygen mask and flight goggles. He turned his attention back forward, guiding the deep red Firebat into assault position.

# CHAPTER SIX

**So Close and Yet So Far**

The rain drilled downward like scores of wet, sloppy bullets firing from the heavens, but merely splattering apart on impact with the surface. Stormy, powerful winds chased the rain down to the ground, then swept the earth and whipped back up into the sky, carrying with them anything light enough or small enough. Fortunately, The Baroness was neither light nor small enough to be carried away, but it still thrashed at her long, night black hair and her slender body as she stomped through the foot deep mud nearing the southwest coast of the island. A single hand lifted over her lightly colored face blocking the gale force and rain, but her hair still flew about from the aggressive wind tunnel and she was soaked from head to toe like a drowned woodchuck. Whatever hair wasn’t whipping in the wind was plastered to her round scalp and stuck there like paper mache. Her face was contorted behind her wire rim glasses and her green eyes darted back for a split second.

“Destro?” she asked, half shouting over the wind. They were nearing the western edge of the thick forest behind the airfield. The two Cobras had an appointment to keep.

“Yes, my love, I am here,” Destro replied, trudging through the deep forest mud as rain pelted down at him, even though the trees sheltered him. Wind blasted against his broad, leather covered chest, and his high-necked red fur collar trembled under its strength. His right hand clutched at his ribs, which ached dully like a slow burning candle, not an agony, but a constant, warm pain settling through his left ribcage. But the Cobra arms supplier was merely happy to be alive at this point, a miracle in and of itself after being at ground zero of a GI Joe bombing run. But he had taken one of them out of the picture. That was settling to him, at least. Ahead, he could see the Baroness walking more quickly, picking up her pace now that the water was closer. Destro could almost hear the churning waves slapping at the wet, marshy beach as the end of the thick vegetation grew near. He could see out into the land beyond, and was amazed at what the storms had done to the former marshland. The grass was drenched beyond recognition, with the pounding water mixing with the soil and creating a thick, soupy mess rolling and churning over the once grassy land. It was thick, wet mud, plain and simple, probably a foot and a half deep, and Destro hoped it was too wet to solidify around their legs as they crossed. The Baroness’ swift motion confirmed his thoughts as she was slowed by the deep mess, but did not stop. Destro stepped softly out from the woods, taking great care not too step too hard and be sucked into the dark, chunky land. He took one easy step, and then a second, but suddenly a voice shouted hard and loud to be heard over the storm, brought him to a standstill.

“Destro!” It was an almost frantic scream. A mixture of dread and the utmost pleasure, shouted by someone looking for something, but not expecting to find it. The man in the silver mask turned, his face frowning underneath. A single figure stood ten feet away, framed by the slamming storm. With a loud *CRACK* a bright yellow bolt of lightning scorched the sky behind him, bathing the beach in light for but a split second. Destro hadn’t needed the illumination to know who it was. The man’s body language and voice was description enough.

“Didn’t expect to see me here, did you, murderer?” the figure demanded, stomping steadily forward through the deep muck.

“No, Flint. I did not.” Destro said simply, remaining where he was, not moving, not backing away. As the figure walked closer he saw the weapon in his hand, a slender, round shotgun, the stock removed.

“Don’t imagine that you’re glad to see me, Snake.” Flint kept the weapon trained on the large man’s chest, the barrel stock-still and hovering. “Have you missed me?” his face was almost insane with rage, Destro could see now, as he stepped closer. Another fork of lightning tore from the heavens, bathing the man in an almost mystical glow.

“To be honest, Flint, I haven’t thought about you at all,” Destro pointed succinctly. Flint chuckled.

“You are a callous bastard, aren’t you?” Flint asked, as he grew somewhat nearer. His eyes narrowed and he viewed the Cobra with a sideways glare. “Something’s changed in you, Destro…you’re different.”

The larger man crossed his arms, adjusting his stance slightly in the seeping mud. “The world has changed, Flint. A man in my position just needs to keep up.”

Flint sneered a vicious, soulless sneer. “You don’t have much longer to worry about it, bucko.” The shotgun lifted and pressed against the arms dealer’s broad chest, but he remained still.

“Are you going to shoot me, Joe? In cold blood?”

“Uh uh…you got that all wrong, Destro. I’m no Joe. Not anymore.” Flint’s cold, dark eyes pierced into the very being of his foe.

 “Thanks to you.” He jabbed the thin barrel into the larger man’s chest, which was rock solid and didn’t budge.

Destro snickered. “Typical. This day and age, someone is always looking for someone to blame.” Flint lowered the shotgun and moved in close, breathing hotly into Destro’s masked face.

“I don’t have to look scumbag.” His angry voice breathed warm hate straight into the masked man’s face, through the open slits in his mask. “You’re right here.” He stepped back away, lifting the shotgun back into firing position.

“Destro?” the shrill voice echoed through the night from many feet away.

“Take your leave, Baroness. I will meet you at the Moray in ten minutes,” Destro said calmly and evenly, as if merely stating a fact.

“What is going on here?” she screeched, walking out into the open area by the rushing ocean water. She stopped many yards away and gasped. “You!” she shouted a Flint.

“Baroness!” Destro shouted, almost angrily. “Leave now. I will join you shortly.”

“Destro, he’s got a weapon…”

“And we do not. I will settle this, trust me.”

The Baroness nodded uneasily, and stepped back slowly. She turned and disappeared into a small grouping of trees to the south.

“Why lie to the woman, Destro? You and I both know there’s no Moray trip in your immediate future.”

“I don’t lie, GI Joe. You won’t shoot me. You can’t.”

Flint snarled and stepped in, the shotgun pressing up flush against the chin of Destro’s beryllium mask. “Are you willing to stake your life on that?”

Destro did not budge. He stood firmly, holding his ground. “Deep inside, Flint…you know the truth.”

Flint didn’t flinch even the slightest bit. “Truth? Who are you to talk about truth?”

“You were there…we all were. These are your inner demons talking, Flint, that’s all.” Destro spoke clearly and simply, hoping to overcome the Joe with startling rationalism. “Deep, deep inside you know I’m not the callous murderer you make me out to be.”

Flint was so enraged, he trembled.

“Deep inside you know the whole thing was an unfortunate accident. A toss of the dice. Random occurrence, if you will.”

“*LIAR!*” Flint tensed, his finger darting quickly, but Destro was quicker and slapped the gun away even as it roared with its deafening thunder, a blast of smoke rolling into the sky.

“Well, Flint. I guess you proved me wrong.” With a twist of his wrist, the shotgun broke free of the Joe’s grasp and landed many feet away, slowly sinking into the mud.

Flint glared at Destro, his eyes narrow and focused into thin beams of hatred. “You…murdered…her.” He said it simply and angrily, punctuating each word with a speck of spittle flying from his lips, mixing with the millions of falling raindrops. Another scorching finger of white-hot lightning seared to the earth, directly followed by the shattering blast of thunder.

“I know what you’re thinking, Flint. I know better than you think.” Destro’s body language was firm and unrelenting. A thick curtain of rain slammed down around them as more deep thunder roared in the distance.

“You know nothing!” Flint shouted, throwing his clenched fist into a tight arc with the right side of his body. It plowed into Destro’s left ribcage and he screamed in shocked pain, and stumbled to his knees, mud rising up onto the smooth leather of his uniform.

Destro coughed as the dull pain in his ribs was now flared into a raging inferno of agony. “Beating me won’t make it better, Flint. It won’t bring Allison back.”

Another bolt of lightning signaled the peak of the former Joe’s rage and he leaped at the fallen snake, swinging to kill.

Ace’s eyes swept over his console as he brought the jet into a shallow dive, and banked softly to the right. The Skystriker moved swiftly, its pointed wings pulled in tight, and the afterburners cranking to speed up the patrol. It seemed like they’d covered the whole gulf by now, but he knew they hadn’t. He knew Wild Weasel had to be out here somewhere.

“Anything yet, Ace?” the voice crackled in his headset.

“Negative, Slipstream,” the Joe pilot replied through his black helmet. He stretched slightly in the seat, his olive drab flight suit wrinkling with the motion. He turned his head slowly to the right, glancing out into the pouring rain and the churning gulf waters. This far out into the ocean, the clouds had parted somewhat and the sheltered moon cast an eerie glow over the crashing waves. With a soft twinkle, the moonlight caught a flash of metal down near wave level, but as quickly as it appeared, it was gone. Ace glanced back at his readings, then turned and looked back out the side of his canopy.

“Did you catch that, Slipstream?” he asked his wingman.

“What’s that?” the Conquest pilot replied.

“A glint off something at wave top. Just a flash of light.”

“Must have missed it, man.”

“All right. I’m going down for a closer look.”

“Suit yourself. I’ve got your six.”

The Skystriker X-14 dropped into a low dive and banked around, skimming just over the top of the wild, windblown waves of the Gulf of Mexico. Nothing was visible from this angle either and he began to wonder if he’d even seen anything at all. Then from what seemed like all around him, the air split with piercing shrieks and an echoing howl as a pair of deep crimson attack planes flooded over him like he was standing still. The first one whipped by his right side, shuddering the cockpit with its shrill scream. Ace whipped his head to his right, searching for the location of the noise when a second one streaked by his other side, going the other direction. The Joe yanked hard on the yoke, pulling the sleek white plan into a steep climb pulling away and out of the cluster of enemy planes.

“Slipstream!” he shouted, banking slightly and leveling out to circle around.

“I see ‘em, Ace. A pair of Firebats! I’m converging on your coordinates.”

“Where did they come from?” Ace asked, circling the plane to the left while the wings popped out from their resting place to increase the plane’s maneuverability. A rattling barrage of gunfire shook the night and the Skystriker jolted as twenty-millimeter peppered the undercarriage, but Ace leveled it out and guided it down and around just as the Conquest moved in for the kill. Slipstream could see both red planes whipping through the air amazingly fast and making impossibly sharp turns, simply circling around the Skystriker, blasting at it with their nose guns.

“You wanna play, boys?” Slipstream asked, punching up his display screens. “Be prepared to play hard!” The Conquest’s engines roared to a fever pitch as the V-shaped prototype fighter streaked towards the trio of planes. One of the Firebats broke off their pursuit and spun back around to take on the new threat, but the other remained hot on Ace’s heels, mini guns roaring. Ace’s superior piloting skills had saved the white plane from too much damage, but it couldn’t last forever against the smaller, more maneuverable aircraft. The Conquest fired away with its own nose guns, slamming the Firebat as it drew nearer to him, smacking heavy lead against the front of the cockpit and the front stabilizers. The small red plane lurched a little, but collected itself and zipped back forward, hurtling just by the camouflaged plane. Slipstream ignored this threat and focused on the plane hugging Ace’s tail.

“Ace!” he shouted, ignoring the blinking threat indicator now illuminated in his cockpit.

“A little busy right now!” Ace replied hastily as the X-14 leaped to one side, barely avoiding another gun barrage.

“Fold the wings and continue your search! We’re out of time…I’ll take care of these bozos.”

“I can’t do that, Slipstream,” he said as the ‘Striker dove for the water, and then banked away, the Firebat still hot on his heels.

Slipstream glared down at his radar screen, smiling as his “lock-on” light finally lit. He roared off a narrow missile and banked away just as the Firebat tailing him peppered his tail with gunfire. The Joe pilot craned his neck, looking out of the cockpit just as the crimson attack plane blew apart from the missile strike. He began to smirk, but the oddly shaped aircraft shook violently to one side, throwing him against the side of the cockpit.

“I’m on him,” Ace started by Slipstream shouted a negativity.

“Ace! You have to find the Rattler! Don’t worry about me!” the Conquest was limping as a column of fire roared from its left engine.

“Slip—“

“Ace, you know I’m right! I can handle one stupid Firebat! Now *go!*”

Ace closed his eyes, and then opened them, glancing down at his fuel supply. Like it or not, the other pilot was right. He didn’t have the time or the gas to fool around in a firefight.

“Don’t worry, man…I’ll see you on the Flagg…”

Ace had lost one wingman that night, and had no desire to lose a second, but Slipstream’s life compared to the life of millions wasn’t even close. Without a reply, Ace folded the narrow wings back in tight to the body, banked the white jet away, hit the afterburners and was gone.

“Good man,” Slipstream replied, guiding the Conquest into a steep climb. The plane shuddered and more gunfire slammed into one of the tail fins. Slipstream glanced back, seeing the Firebat close behind, hugging his six, just waiting for the perfect shot. The Conquest lurched one way, and then another, but the dark red Cobra plane would not release.

“Well, flyboy,” Slipstream said softly, glancing at his threat indicator. “You want my six so bad?” He positioned his hands over two different controls in the tight aircraft. Warning lights illuminated the whole cockpit, and the plane was not going to stay airborne for much longer as the tail fins began to break away from the abuse. With lightning swiftness, the Joe pilot cut his thrusters and hauled back on the yellow and black lever at the same time. The Conquest stopped with a shuddering jolt just as the gray suited pilot punched free from the cockpit, soaring into the night sky. He glanced back as he rose swiftly into the air and smirked as the red Firebat pounded into the abruptly slowed plane from behind. Both aircraft were swallowed by an orange/yellow cloud and blast of smoke, as they crunched together into a single unrecognizable mass of steel and glass. His parachute burst open and he drifted slowly to the water’s surface amidst a sprinkling of airplane debris, some green and black, and some a deep, blood red. With a quick slice, he cut the parachute cord a few feet above the freezing water and dropped into the deep gulf, the cold water suddenly cutting through his flesh like a white-hot knife. Slipstream yanked a small cord in his uniform and the collar puffed comically, providing him with an instant flotation device and he bobbed there, wondering what to do next. His question was soon answered by the churning water around him, growing to a strange bubbling pitch, rumbling like a boiling pot as four strange shapes broke through the water’s surface all around him, green/blue streaming from their metal surface.

“What the--?” he asked no one, glancing around nervously. As soon as he squinted his eyes and identified the four craft real worry settled in. The four watercrafts looked remarkably similar to the Cobra Stellar Stiletto, their experimental rocket plane capable of interstellar travel, but this wasn’t space they were flying through, this was water. Each clear, reinforced cockpit eased open with light hisses revealing the pilots inside who Slipstream did not like the looks of. They stepped out of the submarines and stood on the smooth metal surfaces of them, each one equipped with a long spear gun. They each wore gray wet suits adorned with dark tiger stripes and had a quite elaborate breathing mechanism strapped to their broad chests. A helmet covered each one’s head as well, colored a deep blue. Cobra blue, in fact, confirmed by the grinning red emblem proudly displayed on the helmet’s forehead. Slipstream’s hopes dwindled quickly.

“Well, well,” one of them said smartly, striding closer to the Joe, remarkably well balanced on the slippery steel surface of the watercraft. “Look what we caught, Tigersharks,” he said to the surrounding divers. “Looks like you’re elected to be our first victim, flyboy,” he continued, lifting the spear gun to his goggle- covered eye. “But definitely not our last.” His finger twitched on the trigger as Slipstream bobbed there helpless, surrounded by the four subs. Suddenly an insanely bright light seemed to shred the black night apart, piercing down on the four men from the heavens, hitting them with almost a physical force.

“What? Tigersharks attack!” he screamed, pointing up at the strange object emitting the large, circular light. Slipstream noticed for the first time that the water was churning around him, spinning in miniature whirlpools as a fierce wind beat down on it from above. The spear guns shook as they fired, but the battle was over before it even began. A thunderous roar exploded from just under the searchlight, further illuminating the night in orange, strobing flashes. Red tracer fire slammed down on top of the four men on their submarines, cutting through them and quickly dropping them into the water surrounding the Joe pilot. They didn’t shout, scream or plead; they merely thrashed and flew backwards into the water under the punishing force of the heavy caliber chin turret. Sparks shot from the metal sub as the gun exploded, but Slipstream was not in fear for his life. Seconds later it was over and silence descended on the night again with the exception of a beating wind and rapid low thudding in the air. The spotlight shifted to focus on the Joe pilot and a thin rope dropped down, actually striking the Joe in the helmet before drifting to the water next to him. He grabbed it and smiled as he was pulled up inside the familiar tan and brown Tomahawk helicopter.

The man in the metal mask tensed his muscles as the other man charged down at him, almost screaming with rage. Rain continued to abuse the men and the ground around them, mixing with the once solid ground and changing it to a mushy, dark, deep pool of mud, in which each man sprawled as the former Joe tackled the current Cobra second in command. Destro twisted under Flint’s attack and wrenched sideways, throwing his attacker into the mud behind him, sending him sliding almost comically. Flint threw out his feet and stopped the slide, then leapt forward again, lunging at the Cobra. Destro sidestepped and drove a hard leather fist into the Joe’s midsection, doubling him over.

“Come now, Flint! Your anger is clouding your judgment! You know that.”

The Joe didn’t answer, instead lashing out with his right leg, clipping the larger man behind the right calf. His black leg whipped out from under him and he stumbled backwards into the deep mud, seconds before Flint lunged and was on him again. He wrapped his gloved fists around the Cobra’s throat and squeezed gently.

“Flint!” Destro coughed. “You can’t…blame me forever…”

Flint snarled, lifting Destro’s head up, and then slammed it back against the muddy ground. The Cobra whipped his right fist around in a tight circle and drilled it into Flint’s left cheek, hitting him with a rocking right cross. His beret spun off his head as he was thrown roughly to his right, landing in a chunky brown splash in the deep, wet liquid. Flint didn’t stay down and charged back at the Cobra, his fist raising.

“I’ve been blaming myself, too Flint. But I’ve come to realize…” Destro rolled away, snapping his feet together, trapping Flint’s ankles. The dark haired man stumbled forward and rolled to the edge of the forest, kicking up mud and dirt.

“And you know it, too! If anyone is to blame, it is—“

“Shut up!” Flint lashed up and swung a wild fist, which blasted against the side of Destro’s head. Destro stumbled by reflex, but Flint drew back his hand with a shout. He charged again, but again Destro kept him at bay. He threw a solid sidekick and the former Joe ran headlong into it, catching the angled foot in his sternum, exhaling sharply and stumbling backwards. Destro went on the offensive and moved in quickly, drawing his hand back. With a grunt, he drove it hard and fast into his opponent’s jaw, knocking him back into a clumsy spin and fall into the mud. The murky liquid seeped over the former Joe as he lay there, looking up at his enemy. It slowly climbed up over his arms and rose up his chest. He moved his arms around to help him set up and smiled softly as his right hand closed around a large, solid rock at the forests’ edge. The large man in leather moved in while the Joe laid there, mud slowly crawling over his body. As Destro moved in close, Flint jumped forward, swinging his right hand around in a wide whipping arc and cranked the thick, solid rock into the weapons supplier’s helmeted head. It collided with a dull *WHANG* and Flint’s fingers shot open releasing the big stone as Destro groaned and fell backwards, tiny flecks of spark dancing from his temple. He hit the ground with a thump and grunt, his beryllium mask spreading apart at the seal on the side. As he peeled himself from the wet ground, the metal helmet split slowly and fell to the earth, revealing his angry, but dazed scowl and a thick swath of crimson spreading down the left side of his head.

“Well…struck…But you could kill me, and the truth would…still…stare you in the face….every time…you look in the mirror.”

Flint stood above the Cobra, leaning slightly, breathing haggardly, his fingers flexing. “I…I know the truth, Destro…you are the one who is in denial.”

The Cobra stood, rubbing his temple, and pulling away the gloved hand, now covered in red. His head was amazingly similar to the metal mask he wore, smooth and round, with no hair whatsoever except for the bushy gray tinged goatee surrounding his pursed lips.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten already?” Destro asked the Joe, stepping forward.

Flint rushed in suddenly and rocked Destro with an uppercut, then drove his other hand into the side of his already thrashing head in a rapid, vicious one-two combination. Destro stumbled back, but remained standing, refusing to give any ground.

“Have…your inner demons…warped that much of your memory?”

Flint struck again, but Destro dodged and answered with his own blistering punch. The former Joe dropped to one knee.

“Don’t you remember, Flint? Must I remind you?”

Flint charged up, wrapping his arms around the large man’s waist. Destro stumbled back, but quickly resumed his balance and brought two clenched fists crashing against Flint’s back, knocking him back to the mud.

“Remind you of what happened? You charging after me with your gun blazing?”

“Shut up!” Flint shouted, sweeping Destro’s legs out from under him. He was on him suddenly, slamming him in the face with rapid punches. Destro brought his knee up into his chest and shoved out hard, tossing the other man back first into the mud. The Cobra raised his head, wiped his bloodied lip and scowled at the Joe.

“What was I supposed to do, Flint? L…let you s…shoot me?” Destro stood and walked over to the prone Joe, whose breath came in heavy, uneven gasps. As the weapons supplier drew near, the other man whipped up his heavy combat boot, drilling Destro between the legs. With a frantic exhale, the large man bent over and Flint rose up, grabbing the sleeves of his leather jacket. He yanked and twisted, tossing Destro over his hip and sending him flailing to the ground, his jacket ripping free of his massive frame. The Cobra lay there, and then slowly picked himself up, leaving his jacket laying torn in the mud. He wore a tight white tank top, now caked in mud, and the blood from his head and face soaked the edges to a dull, metallic copper.

“I d…I did as any man would, Flint. As *you* would have done.”

Flint didn’t reply, he only charged forward, swinging a vicious boot. Destro lunged to one side, taking the kick hard in the right pectoral, but wrapped his large arm around the foot and lifted up, dumping the Joe onto the wet ground. He moved in as Flint went down, grabbing the Joe by the collar of his own leather jacket and lifting up.

“I shot back, Flint! What else could I have done?”

“D…die…” Flint muttered, but Destro didn’t oblige then and wasn’t about to now. He spun and tossed the other man through the air, sending him sprawling through foot deep muck.

“Yes, Flint, I fired back! I had no gun…I *had* to use my wrist rocket!” Destro’s own anger level was rising as he stormed forward and leaned down to Flint’s face, looking him deep in the eyes. Flint glared back, his gaze caught by the silver gleam waving from Destro’s thick neck. The Joe stared carefully as the rain pounded down around, his temper flaring. He wrapped a solid brown-gloved fist around the dangling silver and dragged them close, dragging Destro as well. His eyes squinted down at the name on the tags as he lay there back first, and a fire ignited deep inside him, only the slightest flicker given away by a menacing flash in his eyes.

“What the hell is *this*?” he demanded, squinting down at it in rage. The tiny metal rectangles bunched together in his fists, but the too familiar name imprinted on them scorched into his consciousness.

Destro was momentarily confused.

“Some kind of damn *trophy*?” Flint screamed yanking the dog tags to him, tearing them from their silver segmented cord, sprinkling tiny silver balls over the lying Joe. As he pulled he kicked out with his foot, catching Destro in the chest and sending him sprawling back. But Destro was still unfazed.

“I…I *had* to use my wrist rocket…don’t you understand?” he was almost justifying to himself as he spoke to Flint, trying to get the events right in his head. Flint jumped forward and blasted the Cobra with a chest high front kick, knocking him back into the mud. He landed in a splash and dirty, brown spray, skidding softly, with Flint close behind. Destro kicked up, striking the Joe in the ribs, and sending him stumbling to the ground next to him.

“Y…yes, Flint…I fired the rocket. It w…was y…your l…life or mine.” Destro’s voice came in battered rasps as he spoke, coughing, tiny specks of red flying from his lips. “So…I fired.”

Flint laid there, his breath just as labored.

“B…but what did *you* do, Flint? W…what did you do?”

Flint squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block the memory from coming as his muscles tensed, and anger rose in his stomach like bile. He rolled over and yanked Destro roughly to his feet, but the Cobra was quicker and plowed him in the stomach with a swift right hand, then followed it quickly with three more lightning quick punches to the face…left-right-left blasting like a machine gun, rocking the former Joe’s head like a punching bag. Flint began to stumble back, but Destro caught him by the collar.

“W…what d…did you do, Flint? W…what?”

“I…I…” Flint could not form the words as his eyes fluttered in his head.

“Y…you *moved* Flint! Y…you dove…out o…out of the w…way. Like a s…scared *child*!” He brought Flint closer, who shoved away, sending Destro stumbling back clumsily. The two men were drenched by the torrential rain…caked in mud from head to toe, blood mingling with the gray clumps of wet earth. They stood there in crooked stances, wobbling back and forth, struggling just to stay on their feet. Both men breathed in harsh, spastic gasps, their breath coming out like they were standing; crooked, desperate, and uncertain. Their arms hung loosely by their sides, their heads barely being kept upright. Flint could feel one eye already starting to swell shut and the left side of Destro’s head was opened like a split watermelon, blood still bubbling to the surface. The rain stormed down; washing streaks of lightly hued red down their flesh, and over their drenched, dirty uniforms.

“Yes, Flint,” Destro continued through a struggling voice, almost inaudible in the falling rainstorm. “You moved…and Lady Jaye was caught in the b…blast.”

Flint’s eyes squeezed shut and he dropped clumsily to both knees, his head slumping forward. His breath barely rasping, yet his chest shook with powerful, mighty heaves. Destro approached him as an earth shattering exploding crash of thunder rocked through the marsh. Flint’s body shook wildly as if hit by an impact, his torso twisting with a violent awkwardness. He stumbled forward, catching himself with both hands, mud, seeping up over his arms, up to his elbows. Destro stepped back uncertainly as thunder crashed with the loudness of a thousand Fourth of July celebrations. Flint jerked again, his face twisting into a confused, uncertain glare. His face slammed into the wet mud with a dull splat, thin trails of smoke spiraling up from his back, mingling with the night air.

“You miss her so, much, Flint? Join her in *HADES!*” Destro’s head whipped up at the voice, and he suddenly realized that it wasn’t thunder he was hearing. The Baroness stood there, her arm extended, a large metal Beretta clutched tightly in her fist. Its barrel smoldered slightly as a pair of shell casings rolled to a stop, slowly swallowed by the churning mud. Destro’s eyes were wide in disbelief as the former Joe laid face first in the mud, his head turned sideways and glaring out into the woods, the dog tags still clutched as a lifeline in his eager right fist. Destro lowered his gaze, shaking his head slightly.

“Finally, Flint,” he said softly, bending over to retrieve his mask, his back screaming in agony. “Rest in peace, old enemy. I owe you that much.” He reached down and eased shut the former Joe’s eyelids, and then stood and joined his consort, walking back towards their ride to safety in the Amazon.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

**Just A Man**

The Citadel loomed before them like an ancient tribal legend…a stone god residing over his kingdom, looking down on his followers and demanding sacrifice to his alter. The large, singular bay window eye glared down upon its land, at one point teaming with life, teaming with his followers, willing to fight, willing to kill, and willing to die simply because he willed it. But now, the land was cold and barren. The iron steeds were shattered and burned to the ground, the men controlling them laying along with them, blood mixing with oil and driven into the Earth by the powerful large bullets of rainfall. The path to the Citadel was clear, a nicely arranged bombing pattern had knocked aside many of the wrecked tanks and had tossed the soldiers haphazardly away, leaving a strange, winding path through the scrap and carnage, drawing the seekers to what they were looking for. Smoke still scoured the air and clung to every molecule and atom, tossed with the breeze, flooding the men’s nostrils and squiggling down their throats. But the men paid no mind. They were hard men; that much was obvious only by their walk. They strode with a determined purpose; a singular goal, now easily within their reach, and yet still so hard to grasp. They had the eyes of a lion in the Serengeti; narrow and piercing, searching for their prey, focusing on the hunt, but yet still wary of all that surrounded them. As they walked determined through the valley, smoke spiraled up behind them, obscuring them, mystifying them, so that they almost became wraiths in the night…invisible ghosts who strike, and kill, then disappear as though they were never there. The evidence of these wraiths was prominent. Scattered all over the valley…through the trail to the south of the volcano. Along the north shore and southwest. Even on the beach. The casual tossed remains of the refuge of human life, necessary dues for the evil presence on the island. A white/yellow tear of lightning scorched through the air, splitting the night into two halves, and then faded, leaving only a slightly luminescent afterglow. The shattering clap of thunder slammed against the island a split second from the lightning’s fade, which still cast an eerie glow over the weary soldiers, marching single file towards the Citadel. They walked straight and even, not hiding or crawling; not sneaking or spying. Straight towards the Citadel they marched single file, assault rifles and other pleasantries dangling from tightly clenched fists, salty clear rainwater running down their arms and over their larger than life bodies. The General had decided the time for hiding and sneaking was over. They were coming for the heart of the beast, and they wanted everyone to know it and be afraid. The hard work was done, but there was still a job ahead, and these men wanted to complete it at any cost. It was a confrontation decades in the making and finally coming to a head…finally nearing a resolution. One way or another. General Hawk led the morbid procession, his eyes cold and hard, and his walk determined and solid. His helmet was gone, he was not sure where, and a deep red swipe ran across his forehead, now clotted and hard. His light blonde hair was matted and tussled, and his face a stern, angry glare. Roadblock and Leatherneck flanked him, faces just as solemn, just as serious. The large heavy machine gunner held his familiar fifty caliber Browning in his right hand, his dark skin covering bulging muscles barely held in check by the thin cotton green tank top he wore. A long strand of ammunition was slung over his shoulder and banged lightly against his large leg as it pumped with every muscled step. Leatherneck wore his green boonie hat still and his camouflage fatigues were caked a dirty brownish color, which was slowly being washed away by the rain. All others fell in line behind the first three, letting them make the first impression…letting them be the intimidators, a craft these three men were absolute experts in. General Hawk, a long time Brigadier General, who still fought alongside his troops; Leatherneck a lifetime Marine and hardnosed Drill Instructor for not only Marines, but for the GI Joe team as well. And of course Roadblock. A six and a half foot tall monster of a man, whose mere appearance *without* a huge machine gun would cause any normal man panic. Throw in the hog almost as long as Roadblock is tall, and any snake would be having second thoughts before the first shot was fired. But Hawk had found out early in this operation that these weren’t just any snakes. Times had changed since Cobra’s dawn, and finally, Cobra was changing with them. Becoming more determined, more nasty, more ruthless, to compete in a more ruthless world. It had worked for them thus far, too. The plans had gone off without a hitch, with merely a smattering of good luck tossed the Joes’ way for them to run with. General Hawk wondered how long their luck would last. For some of them, it was already over. Ghostrider and Tracker were dead; Outback and Spearhead hang on by threads. For all he knew, Chuckles and Law were still in their respective comas. Who knew when they would be out, or if. It had been an unbelievable streak of bad luck that had started this escapade off, and now an unbelievable streak of good luck was helping them resolve it. Or so the General hoped. The Citadel was four stories tall and once you got inside, there was nowhere to go but up. Each floor had it’s own purpose, it’s own design. But Hawk knew the Commander was on the top floor, and he didn’t intend to stop until he got there. It was quite impossible to tell what might be standing between him and his arch nemesis of almost two decades, but right there and then General Clayton Abernathy decided that whatever it was, he would get by. Even if he was the only one left, riddled with bullets, blood streaking the floor behind him, he would crawl up the last flight of stairs and with his dying breath he would take Cobra Commander to hell with him. For some reason, that was how the blonde haired General had always envisioned it. He never pictured a world with just one of them in it. Even over the past half decade, when the Commander was thought dead, Hawk still believed he was out there. He knew even as he was called into the Secretary of Defense’s office what he was being called in there for. Hawk knew deep down that after tonight, there would only be one man left standing, or perhaps neither. Honestly, the General wasn’t too afraid to go down in a hail of bullets as long as Cobra Commander went with him. There’s usually a healthy respect between rivals; a fun kind of competition, and that was what it had been in a way, at first. But respect only goes so far. Competition is no longer fun when millions of lives are at stake. Cobra was growing too big too fast, and had come far too close this time to be allowed another chance. Hawk made up his mind…even if Cobra Commander dropped to his knees, begging and pleading for his life, the General would shoot him down and not have a second thought. Of course, the General realized that the Commander would *never* do that, which was somewhat of a rationalization to him. But still…it had to end, and it had to end tonight.

“*COVER!!!*” The General snapped back to the real world in a sudden flash, unaware that he had even been drifting. Falcon’s voice was sharp and loud in his ear, and the rough hand shoving him to the ground was no gentler. Hawk landed on one knee, his .45 popping up into his hand almost by reflex, the other hand sliding the chamber quickly back to load the bullets. Tracer fire lit up the dark, wet night, streaking towards them like thousands of ticked off lightning bugs and he hit the mud in the nick of time as they zipped over their heads slamming against HISS wreckage and chunks of earth tossed up in craters by the bomb strike. Falcon shifted forward, pumping his shotgun.

“Let us handle this, General. It’s our job to get you boys inside!” He shuffled forward, letting off a couple shots, cranking the pump back in between each rocking blast. Hit & Run ran up to them in a low crouch, his AR-15 chattering loudly, bucking in his grip. The Joes had scattered when the shooting started, abandoning the path and scrambling behind the jagged metal remains of HISS tanks and Stingers.

“What do we have?” Falcon asked the light infantryman, dropping back down behind cover and pounding another shell into his weapon.

“Low Light says there’s six SAW Vipers in a sandbag nest just outside the front door. Three heavy weapons, most likely 60’s and possibly foot soldiers in waiting.”

As if to answer the question another barrage of gunfire tore across the valley, this one sounding much lighter and quicker. Two loud, sharp *KRAKK*s responded from a few yards back. Low Light was in position. Hawk edged out from behind the HISS and looked out ahead. About ten feet down the path Roadblock and Leatherneck huddled behind a mangled Stinger and Leatherneck was loading grenade rounds into his 203. Hawk looked over across the path and saw Alpine and Dial Tone also crouched behind torn up armor plating. Hit & Run lifted a walkie-talkie to his ear and nodded.

“Low Light says there were two Night Vipers flanking the nest. Emphasis on the word ‘were’. According to his instruments, there’s no other cover fire out there.”

“Any advice, sir?” Hit & Run asked, ejecting a spent clip from his AR-15 and drawing another one out of a pouch on his uniform.

Hawk glanced around and grinned lightly. “Yeah. Let them do their job,” he said, motioning towards the other side of the path. Recondo, Shockwave and Kevlar crouch-walked at an angle to the path, swiftly ducking behind the jagged armor and scrapped vehicles. Recondo looked at them and nodded, then flashed five fingers, and Hawk took the hint.

“All right boys. We’re drawing fire for five seconds starting now!” He whipped his body around the cover and squeezed off a tight group of shots towards the gun nest, and Falcon and Hit & Run followed suit. Low Light knocked away with his large sniper rifle, and within seconds return fire sprayed back at them. Hawk glanced over, and the three Joes were in motion. Recondo dashed across the path, his shotgun blaring and the SAW Vipers spun to track him. Leatherneck dropped out from behind his cover and roared off a frag, then whipped back behind as the grenade went off with a brisk *BLAM*, sending the SAW Vipers ducking for cover. Recondo slid to a halt behind another chunk of armor across the path as the SAW Vipers stood to return fire. Suddenly Shockwave and Kevlar were on them from the right, moving in like lightning and blasting with their MP5’s. They trapped them in the confines of the nest and got them in a vicious crossfire, cutting through them in seconds under a brutal hail of lead.

“Clear!” shouted Shockwave, his automatic pointed down at the splayed bodies.

“Clear!” replied Kevlar, pointing his weapon in the same fashion. Smoke drifted from the barrels and mingled with the gray cloud spiraling up from the warm bodies in the gun nest.

“The old misdirection ploy…good idea, Shockwave,” Roadblock nodded, patting his old buddy on the shoulder.

“Actually, ‘Block, it was Kevlar’s idea,” he nodded towards the older man and Roadblock turned towards him.

“Good one. Keep up the good work, green blood.” He extended a hand and a smile, and Kevlar returned them both.

“I hope you guys are done being friendly,” Leatherneck said with a hiss as he approached. “Because things are about to go down, and we need some mean, angry SOB’s on our team! Got it?”

“Lighten up, Jarhead,” Roadblock joked, chuckling, but Kevlar stood stock still, taking the advice to heart. They were at the Citadel finally, and stood by the main door, a large wooden entrance leading to the main level. Hawk had been in this building before quite some years ago, but the mission was etched into his mind and so was the layout. He only hoped it hadn’t changed. For some reason the first floor was considered the basement, and was where a lot of the necessities were stored in various wooden crates and supply closets. It was a large, open room, but wooden crates and support beams made for numerous cover spots and the closets would make good hiding spaces. He figured they would branch off at that point, leaving the attack team to defend while they climbed the rest of the way. On this floor, the stairway was on the left wall, about halfway down, behind a thick metal door. The second floor was called the main floor and it was a wide-open room, used mostly for gathering troops for battle and equipping them. There was little cover and it was a straight shot over to the staircase in the back left corner. Hawk closed his eyes, picturing the place as he passed through before, searching for Destro and the Baroness…the third floor came into view now, a command center of a sort. Back then, there had been numerous computer consoles, maps and communications devices. The General wasn’t sure if that stuff was still there, but if it were, that floor would be a challenge as well, with all the extra items to hide behind. On that floor, the staircase was across the room, in the right back corner. Which brought them to the fourth floor. The stairway led to a straight, narrow hallway carpeted in deep red and adorned with various decorations and pictures. There was no cover here and the hallway took a sharp right turn before opening up into Cobra Commander’s personal office with desk, bookshelves, and who knows what else. For whatever reason, the General knew Cobra Commander was there. He could *feel* it. They had him cornered, and had to hit him hard and fast. But the only thing that bothered Hawk was basically part of common knowledge, but applied to this situation a little more perfectly than he liked. When a king cobra is cornered, that’s when it strikes.

The white jet continued its trek through the wet air of the Gulf of Mexico in earnest search for the needle in the haystack. He had followed what he determined to be the quickest routes to a launch spot that would do the most damage, but his radar screen had remained blank the whole time. There was no glimmer, no spark, and no sign of any kind of existence of any other planes within a two hundred mile radius. Doubt curled a tight knot in the Joe’s gut as he wondered if Wild Weasel had simply gone south instead and could be in the midst of dropping the bomb right here and now. But he knew Wild Weasel. After so many years of conflict, he was quite sure he knew how his mind worked and as if by instinct alone he had been led on this path, but to no avail. He was nearing the coast of the United States, but with no signal to latch on to…nothing to look for, it seemed that the search was impossible. Yet he kept on.

Everyone gathered around the General as he beckoned them to come in close and quick. Even as they finished circling around their commander, he pointed his finger at two men and spoke quickly.

“Hit & Run, Alpine. You two are our outside men. I want you two standing guard out here to make sure no eager snakes get too close. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” came the unanimous reply. The two Joes were none too happy about the assignment, but decided now was not the time for arguments.

“Low Light?” Hawk said softly. A few seconds passed, then the night fighter crouch walked over to the huddled group, lifting his infrared visor off of his bearded face. “The floor is yours.”

“Thank you, sir,” Low Light said, then turned to face the other men in the group. As far as rank went, Low Light didn’t possess any above most of the other Joes surrounded there. But as the Joe team usually operated, the person with the most skill or talent in a particular field would serve as field commander if that particular field were important to the mission. Well, no one was better than Low Light when it came to night operations, so they all listened eagerly as he moved in, eyes focused on the group.

“All right, gentlemen,” he said in his trademark gravelly hiss. “I took an assessment of the situation with my visor and this is what we’re dealing with here.” He plucked a shard of metal from a destroyed vehicle off of the ground and considered sketching in the dirt with it. However, the rain still slammed down into the earth and was churning everything together into an indistinct bulbous mush, so he decided that little project would be futile. “Well, I guess we’ll do this by visualization. Directly after the door, we’ve got a pair of troops standing a couple meters to the right. This is the welcome squad. From what I can tell, they are most likely expecting us to blow open the front door and go in shooting. The door is made from an old, but very thick aluminum/steel composite. It will, of course, be locked, and by blowing it, we will announce our presence to the entire Citadel.” He glanced up, looking at all the other Joes as they glared down at him. “We also have a group in the rear of the basement, they look to be a group of four with heavy machine guns. I figure they’re guarding the back from a surprise attack, but can also be used as reserves should the strike come from the front. There are no other groups beyond those two, but approximately a dozen troops are scattered about the room in haphazard fashion. I say troops, because we really don’t know what we’re dealing with here.” He checked for understanding in the other Joes eyes and got it. “I’m ruling out HEAT Vipers and Frag Vipers because of the tight quarters. I’m sure Incinerators will not be there as well for the same reason. What we most likely have is Vipers and possibly SAW Vipers providing the heavy fire. We are going to have to hit them hard and fast, but that is what we do best, right?” The Joes nodded. “Now the main floor, or second floor is a little more heavily fortified, but that shouldn’t be a big deal considering the staircase to the next floor is along the same wall, merely a few yards down. There are what seem to be two blockades set up there, two sandbag barriers with M-60’s manned by most likely SAW Vipers. I have a feeling they’re just going to wait for you to show and pepper the whole wall with large bore ammo.” His eyes were stern and serious, and the other Joes nodded with each sentiment. “Now for the third floor. This will be a fun one. Computer banks run along the back wall and there are also scattered mainframes throughout the room itself. There seems to be a huge map table and I spotted three goons behind that, plus other troops scattered in the room, either behind the mainframes or merely patrolling. But here’s the fun part. The staircase is *across* the room here, and you must go through the troops to get there.” Low Light lifted his eyes and looked straight at Leatherneck, knowing that he was going to be on the strike team and that he had to know what to expect. “As soon as you come out into the room, there will be minimal cover behind the computers along the back wall. Besides that, you have to make your own.” He finished speaking and set down the shard that he was holding, letting it land with a small splat in the muddy earth.

“What about the fourth floor?” Roadblock asked, cocking his head.

“You’re on your own there, Roadblock. There’s some kind of shielding in the walls, my thermals couldn’t penetrate. I have no idea what to expect up there.”

“Great,” Leatherneck replied, wrapping his bare hand around the M-16/M203 that lay at his feet. Low Light nodded to General Hawk who thanked him and returned to the focus of attention.

“Gentlemen. Here is the plan. I’m going to say this once and only once, so listen well and follow my orders to a ‘T’, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” came the quiet, but enthusiastic reply.

“Good. We are going to need any advantage we can get here. Blackout?”

“Y..yes, sir?” Blackout asked, shuffling in closer.

“I need you to cut the latches on that metal door. But I need it done in a way that will remain invisible to the men inside. Is it possible?”

Blackout pulled the torch from his leg and cocked his head, thinking slightly. “I’ll give it a shot, General.”

“Good. Go do that.”

Blackout nodded and broke away from the group.

“All right, Joes. This is the nitty gritty. Everything has boiled down to this point, and some men have given their lives so that we can put an end to Cobra here and now. I plan to do just that.”

“Yes, sir,” was the unanimous reply.

“Shockwave. As usual, you are the “door kicker”. As soon as Blackout is done with the door, I want you leading the charge. You need to take out that door in one solid shot so that we can go in fast and take them down. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Leatherneck, I want you in immediately afterwards. Bloop one frag and only one frag on the group of heavy gunners near the back. I want you to conserve your grenades for use on the third floor if they are needed. If you miss with the first frag, we’ll go from there.”

“Sir.”

“Falcon, Recondo and Low Light, you guys will be going in next to give us support fire. As you give us cover, Kevlar, Dial Tone, Blackout, myself and Roadblock will go in that order. Kevlar, you pop that metal door on the left wall and we file in, Leatherneck and Shockwave pulling in behind us with Roadblock giving us cover. If the attack team finishes its job,” he continued, looking at Lieutenant Falcon, who nodded in return. “Then you boys follow us up, making sure our tails are clear. Understood?”

“Understood, sir!”

Hawk looked at his watch, and then glanced over at the door. Blackout was hunched over, his torch glowing lightly, but no sparks shot out and there was no loud telltale hiss of melting metal. The kid was a pro. “Let’s do this, boys,” he said with a nod, and the group broke their tight huddle, darting towards the large, thick metal door. They lined up in their order, weapons pulled up tight to their chest as Blackout made one last pass down the side of the door with his torch. He hitched it back to his leg and ducked away, unslinging his M-16. Shockwave released his MP5, letting it sway against his body from the leather strap and unhooked twin automatic pistols from the two dark blue holsters on his light blue thighs. Behind the dark blue knit mask, his eyes narrowed and got downright mean. He held the two pistols up, taking a deep breath in, steadying his nerves. He glanced over at Kevlar and winked.

“I’m going to bust this party John Woo style,” he said softly, skillfully twirling the pistols, and then steadying them against his chest. He lowered into a crouch as the rest of the team gathered around.

“Your count, General,” Shockwave said, with a respectful nod. Hawk nodded back and held up his hand.

*Five.*

Hawk tensed his muscles from his forehead down to his toes, and even his fingers tightened hard around the .45 in his wet fist. The rain pounded down around him, drowning out all other noise and the world suddenly shifted its focus to him and his men.

*Four.*

He looked around at his team, a finer collection of troops he had never seen. The world seemed to swirl and slowly shift into slow motion as it always did when combat was near.

*Three.*

He drew in a deep, long breath and crouched his knees slowly as he held up three fingers. All eyes rested on his hand and his mind fiercely tried to push away the doubtful, reflex clogging nags of uncertainty. The time had come again after so many years. He wasn’t sure it ever would again, but here it was.

*Two.*

A group of men. His men…their lives in his hands. He was their leader, their commander, but more importantly to him, he was their peer. Standing next to them at the precipice and staring down into it, preparing to lunge headlong into death.

*One.*

Finally as the single finger held up into the air Hawk could feel clarity of focus coming down into his whirling psyche. A solid, positive goal, one that they were going to reach tonight, regardless of what happened in the next few minutes. The goal was so close…closer than it had been in as long as the Joe commander could remember. He could taste it. It tasted supple like ripe, delicious fruit.

*GO!*

Hawk’s fist pumped dramatically and instantaneously, Shockwave stormed into action, leading the charge. The GI Joe SWAT specialist drew in a deep, almost wary breath as he charged forward, his left shoulder thrusting out into a bone and muscle battering ram. So many things could go wrong in this next instant. The door could hold; the Cobras could be waiting, weapons aimed, just asking for a target. The door could be booby-trapped and explode as soon as he touched it, ending this attack before it even began. With a dull thud his shoulder slammed into the broad, metal door and his heart skipped, fearing that it wouldn’t open. But it did. With an uncertain shudder, the metal door slammed inward, its hinges and latches cut clean with a revolutionary torch carried by a teenager.

*Thanks , kid!* Shockwave’s mind barked out as he threw his body into the room, his eyes narrow, but scanning all the while. As soon as he dropped through the door, he knew the plan had worked, and the Cobras were surprised. There were two of them a couple meters away, as Low Light had said, standing in front of an unmarked wooden crate. They almost jumped as the dark blue blur slammed into the basement with a thump and metallic clang. Before Shockwave could even will himself to do it, his twin pistols barked to life, flashing bright yellow blooms of sparks, rocking the large weapons in his grip. Shell casings spun in slow motion through the air, spinning just by his snarling face, covered by the thick mask, some even bouncing off of his head and rolling on the ground. The acrid smell of gun smoke already flooded the Joe’s nostrils, as he seemed to float through the air, the weapons slamming. Before he could even think to draw his weapon, the first man, a Viper, Shockwave noticed, caught three quick rounds in the upper chest and was thrown roughly backwards, striking the wooden crate. As he tumbled backwards over it, arms and legs flailing, the Joe shifted aim and squeezed off another barrage, sending the second Viper lurching and stumbling to the floor. As Shockwave’s extended shoulder struck the cement floor and he started a smooth sideways somersault, he heard the boots pound in behind him and the dull *WHUMP* of the 203. Even as he rolled up into a low crouch, return fire already scattering deadly lead just above his head, he heard the thin low whistle of the small round object spinning through the air. Shockwave lifted the pistols, plowing off another large barrage until the triggers clicked on empty chambers. Everything still moved in slow motion, rifles jerking with the violent kickback, shell casings hanging in mid air, deadly orange streams of gunfire almost visible with the heightened senses of close combat. Shockwave shot his arms apart, sending the pistols scattering in opposite directions and he whipped up his MP5 even before the other firearms struck the hard floor. The machine gun roared through its silencer as the SWAT man stood up from his crouch, shuffling swiftly to his left. Leatherneck’s M-16 roared in his ear as he and the Marine forced themselves in closer, spraying deadly fire over the whole room. A light smack of grenade against concrete emanated from the far wall and was followed almost directly by a sharp *BLAM*, sudden flash and belch of smoke. Muffled shouts rose from the direction of the blast, and fire stopped for a split second, allowing them to shuffle further inward. Falcon and Recondo slipped through the door next, their shotguns pounding clouds of gray into the already smoke filled basement. Low Light followed right behind, his sniper rifle exchanged for a silenced Uzi with an elaborate starlight scope attached to the top. Gunfire plastered the large room, taking down unsuspecting troops, and forcing the others to hug for cover. The Cobras converged on the far right wall, where a collection of crates offered them a considerable amount of cover from the Joe’s gunfire. Kevlar shot into the room in a swift run, his weapon swinging back and forth, but finding no targets. Dial Tone followed, immediately sprinting to the left wall, which had been cleared of troops by a few quick sweeps from Leatherneck’s M-16. Blackout dashed in next, his M-16 clutched like a lifeline, and his chrome helmet covered head ducking frantically. Hawk was next, running in a diagonal jog, his pistol faced out into the room where Cobras blasted fire towards the running Joes.

*“Cover, we need cover!*” Hawk shouted, ducking quickly and returning fire with his pistol. Roadblock swung into the room, raising his hefty machine gun.”

“Somebody ask for cover?” he shouted over the deafening din of the battle and slammed down on the trigger of his Browning. A huge orange circle of flame sprouted from the large barrel, tiny yellow spurts escaping from the ventilation holes scattered along the side. Long, slender brass casings flew from the weapon like the bullets themselves, and rolled to the floor with a low tinkling. Tracers lit up the basement as Roadblock roared the huge weapon back and forth over the large room, reducing the large crates to so many splinters and sending the Vipers scattering.

“Go!” Hawk shouted to Kevlar who had taken cover and he leapt to his feet, darting towards the metal door in the left wall marked “Stairway”. Dial Tone, Blackout, and Hawk fell in behind, waving on Shockwave and Leatherneck who backpedaled towards the door, still slamming off a healthy dose of return fire. They slipped by Roadblock who shook mightily as his weapon thrashed in his hands. The fact that he could hold such a weapon in his hands and fire it was a testament to the amazing strength of the man that even his huge size didn’t do justice to. As soon as Kevlar approached the door, Roadblock ceased fire and darted after them, leaving Falcon, Recondo and Low Light to mop up. Kevlar pressed his back to the windowless door, pressing his ear against it, but could not hear anything. Hawk gave the motion and Kevlar stepped back, drew his knee into his chest and shoved forward, slamming the thick heel of his combat boot into the handle of the door. With a swift jerk, the door spun open and Kevlar could only tense before machine gun fire slammed repeatedly into his broad chest from inside. The new recruit stifled a shout as he was thrown roughly backwards by the unseen assailants firing assault rifles from inside.

“Man down! Man down!” Shouted Dial Tone, whipping back around from the open doorway. Hawk pushed by Blackout, approaching the door, his pistol raised and ready, Leatherneck hot on his heels. The Joe General threw his arm around the door and yanked the trigger multiple times in rapid succession, his arm jerking with the kickback. Leatherneck slid in next to the General, slamming a clip into his large rifle, then drew a breath and whipped around into the open door, snarling. He spotted the attackers, who were shocked by his brazenness, and pulled the trigger all the way to the handle, spraying the stairwell with deadly lead. Hawk heard a muffled grunt below all the zips and whines of ricocheting bullets, and Leatherneck threw himself into a spin, rolling around to the other side as more gunfire sprayed from the door. Hawk glanced uncertainly at the Marine.

“Siegie!” Leatherneck shouted, ejecting his clip and removing another from his belt. Hawk nodded and sighed, shaking his head slightly. One thing they hadn’t quite banked on. Siegies. Also known as C.G.s or Crimson Guards, Cobra Commander’s elite personal army. Rarely wasted on the battlefield, they’re used to infiltrate human society and attack from within, but are ridiculously well trained and adapted in case battle becomes necessary. Hawk only hoped that there were no Crimson Guard Immortals to deal with. The Siegies were bad enough, but throw in thick metal battle armor, a master in martial arts and an absolute willingness to die for Cobra Commander and you had an evil, unstoppable soldier. Of course, so much training and devotion is necessary that not many cadets make it to that level, but the few that do are a force to be reckoned with. Hawk lowered his pistol, his mind thinking. He looked down at Kevlar who lay sprawled on the floor, bullet holes stitched across his dark chest. He wore a ballistic vest; almost the thickest you can find but such an attack with a powerful enough weapon can cause internal injuries far worse than a bullet wound. Hawk glanced at his watch and decided that there was no more time to waste. He dropped to one knee and spun around low, his pistol up and ready. The Crimson Guard stood waiting, his own rifle perched in his shoulder, a long, narrow bayonet jutting out from under the barrel. He was dressed, as the name indicated, in a deep crimson, adorned with silver medals and decorations for their service. His mask/helmet combination was the same red with a black facemask and narrow silver visor to see through. Hawk had barely a time to notice his uniform as the rifle quickly opened up, zipping just over the General’s head, who ducked away. The Siegie recognized his target immediately and moved in, thinking how great the reward for killing the GI Joe leader would be. As he stepped forward, Leatherneck whipped around and mowed him down in a swift, vicious burst of gunfire. Even as the shot was echoing away, more gunfire roared from in the room. The Joes glanced back worriedly, but Hawk shouted them into action.

“They can handle themselves! Shockwave, check on Kevlar and we’ve got to go up now!”

Shockwave ran over to his comrade and kneeled down, checking the bullet holes. None of them looked to have pierced, but the man was not moving and showed no signs of waking up. The masked man turned to Hawk and shook his head.

“He’s out!”

Hawk grimaced as Roadblock pushed past him and followed the others into the stairway. “Go tell the other Joes they have a wounded man to watch out for. Then join us pronto, got it?”

“Yes, sir!” Shockwave shouted and darted over to the other group, still firing sporadically into the large, square room. Hawk turned and dashed back into the stairwell even as random gunfire streaked towards him and pounded against the wall. The team was already sprinting headlong up the stairs at a full run and before Hawk was even halfway up, Leatherneck had burst through the door on the next level, his rifle shouting angrily. The SAW Vipers responded quickly, their M-60’s opening up with brilliant yellow flashes, jostling wildly on the tripods fastening them to the floor. The SAW Vipers snarled under their purple helmets, their bodies jerking as the weapons fired. Leatherneck dropped and rolled to his left just as the doorway was peppered with heavy machine gun fire, tearing chunks out of the walls and blasting splinters from the wooden doorframe.

“Stay down!” Leatherneck shouted into the stairwell as he came up into a crouch, his hand slamming back on the 203’s pump. With swift, calculated spins, the Cobra heavy machine gunners pivoted behind the sandbagged nest, adjusting aim, trying to pin the camouflaged Joe down. The Marine dropped to his stomach as a barrage tore down at him, ripping apart the wall behind him. He glanced over to his left and saw the door in the back corner, right along the same wall, but wondered how in the world he would get to it. More gunfire suddenly erupted from the stairwell, Leatherneck recognizing the familiar chatter of an M-16 and another small machine gun. One of the SAW Vipers spun back towards the door, only to catch a series of shots in the chest, sending him thrashing wildly. He wore insanely thick composite body armor, but the impact still tossed him backwards like a catapult, sending him stumbling over the back of the nest and falling in a heap on the floor. Around Leatherneck, the assault lightened up a little as the machine gun nest adjusted aim again, trying to hold the reinforcements in the stairwell. The Marine shot to his feet, shuffling sideways as gunfire pounded back towards him, and yanked the trigger of his ‘203, sending a small green baseball streaking through the air, trailed by a light gray twirl of smoke. It arced widely, just passing under the tall ceiling of the main room, and then began its smooth descent, bearing down straight at the machine gun nest.

“Fire in the---“ shouted one of the SAW Vipers, but the warning was too late as the frag plowed into the front sandbagged wall and erupted in a blinding white flash and thunderous explosion. The sandbags tore like tissue paper and split apart, throwing the tan grains into the air and creating a strange noxious cloud of dirt. The flash tore up and back, literally ripping through the SAW Vipers and throwing them backwards among the shredded sandbags and their sprinkling contents. Even as the echo of the blast was still fading, Leatherneck hit the door to the stairwell and opened fire inside the tight passageway, but there was no one there.

“Clear!” he screamed back to the rest of the team who was already pouring out of the stairs and into the room; shuffling along the side wall, back to the corner and to the next level.

“Hear that?” the large, dark skinned Viper asked, cocking his head towards the door on the other side of the room.

“Y..yeah,” replied the smaller Viper next to him, hugging his long gray assault rifle close.

“They’re coming, Satchel. You ready, kid?” He looked down at the younger man, whose face was invisible behind the silver mask, but whose nervous, twitching movements betrayed his fear.

“I’ll be ready, Rhames,” Satchel said softly. “I won’t let the Commander down.”

The large Viper nodded, then glanced around the large room. Computer banks stretched along the back wall from where the stairway opened up into the third floor. They rounded the corner and drew halfway up the wall the two Vipers stood near, and then stopped. A huge, elaborate monitor and controls stood next, not against the wall, but about twenty feet out from it, closer to the middle of the room, surrounded by numerous mainframes and consoles, all connected to it by thick, dark electrical wires. Rhames glanced back at the other stairway in the upper left corner behind him, completely opposite from the other door. Four large men guarded the door, their deep red uniforms immediately instilling fear and respect into the lowly Vipers who stood guard with them. There were four other Vipers crouching behind the consoles and assorted technological apparatus inside the room and three other Crimson Guards. Two standing next to the monitor and a third with his back pressed up against the far wall, his weapon trained on the entrance to the room. Rhames was confident that they had the room secured and the Cobra Commander would reward them well for their braveness in guarding his safety.

*This is my shot,* Rhames thought to himself. *My ticket out of the Viper Corps.* He imagined himself in an Eel uniform…Snow Serpent…Crimson Guard. The last image brought a big smile to his wide, dark face under the mask. He tensed up, ready for action.

Ace banked the white jet around into a lumbering, but smooth right turn, glancing down at his fuel gauge, knowing he wasn’t going to like what he saw. He wasn’t on empty, or even close, but if he was going to have enough gas to get back to Cobra Island, he had to find that Rattler and he had to find it soon. The radar screen still stood blank, like an expressionless face staring back at him from the console. He adjusted radar, heat sensors and even the sonar, but got no readings. Nothing at all. It didn’t make sense, but there it was…according to his screen, the sky was empty with no threats anywhere. Unfortunately, the screen was wrong. Dead wrong. But at the moment, there was nothing the pilot could do but keep flying, and keep looking out his canopy window, trying to see through the driving rains.

“Anything Wet Suit?” Airtight asked, craning his neck back and staring at the Navy S.E.A.L. as he tore through the random clutter on the desks, searching for any clues.

“No,” he replied sourly, glancing over at Airtight whose fingers were tapping swiftly on the keyboard in front of him. “Isn’t that usually Mainframe’s gig?” Wet Suit asked, nodded towards the hostile environment trooper.

“Yes it is, but he had to stay on the Flagg to coordinate our assault and be a liaison to the Department of Defense.”

“Lucky him.”

“Besides, to be a scientist nowadays, you have to have more than just a passing knowledge of computers. Personally, I am quite adept at—“

Wet Suit rolled his eyes as the yellow suited man kept talking, but turned his head when he suddenly stopped.

“Hold the phone.” Airtight said softly, his eyes growing wide. His round, green helmet lay on a charred console next to him, and he ran a hand through his thinning brown hair.

“What’s up?” Wet Suit asked, strolling over to the other man.

“We’ve got something here, Wet Suit! Get me the phone now!”

With swift forcefulness, Leatherneck kicked down the metal door and emerged slowly into the room as it erupted in gunfire. He stopped short as a tearing swath of lead roared towards him from the near wall, sending sparks flying from the metal door. The Marine swiftly jerked back behind the door as the bullets shredded the ground where he had been crouching. He glanced back at the other Joes bunched up behind him, eager and ready.

“This is going to be no fun at all,” Leatherneck snarled as more sparks danced along the edge of the door. The sparks suddenly stopped and Leatherneck moved swiftly, figuring the attacker was reloading. He was right and he jumped from the stairwell, his rifle set firmly in his shoulder and roared off a barrage of heavy fire, throwing the Crimson Guard into a clumsily backward spin until he fell in a heap on the floor. The Joe ducked swiftly as bullets peppered the wall and computer consoles just to his left, which he ducked behind, sparks flying over his green and tan uniform. He had glanced out quickly and seen the room, scattered with the computer equipment and a large, elaborate monitor screen, with the Vipers and Crimson Guards kneeling behind them and firing at them. Gunfire sprayed from almost every direction, chewing up the computer banks and throwing concrete floor chunks into the air. Leatherneck turned to the others, who were still pinned in the stairwell and shook his head. With a deep intake of air, the Marine spun around the console and slammed off a single grenade round into the center of the room, satisfied as it struck the monitor, banked off and hit the ground with a sharp blast, shredding two mainframes and throwing the two men hiding behind them to the floor. They were both Vipers and lay on the floor motionless, their weapons lying a couple feet away. Fire poured towards the Joe and he whipped back around, crouching low behind the computer, which was quickly being whittled away by gunfire.

“Two down!” he shouted, but it was of little consolation. From his quick glance, he could clearly see that there were still four Siegies at least, probably more. There were also numerous Vipers left including two who huddled behind the large monitor, and were almost completely untouchable. Constant gunfire and red tracers slammed down at the doorway and computer blanks, keeping Leatherneck pinned where he was and keeping the other Joes trapped in the hallway. It seemed that they had run out of options.

Near the back of the group of Joes pinned in the stairwell, Dial Tone’s elaborate computerized comm.-pack hummed softly, signaling an incoming message. He glanced back at it as a few stray rounds tore into the hallway, splintering the wall and showering him with tiny shards. He lowered his automatic for a second and hit the switch on his backpack.

“Go,” he said simply, the microphone already extended to his mouth. The radio crackled and a frantic voice burst into his ear.

“Dial Tone! This is Airtight!”

“Listen…Airtight, we’re a little busy at the moment,” he replied, a slightly annoyed look flashing over his mustached face. He ducked his beret-covered head down as the zip and whine of a ricochet sent a chunk of wall spinning just above him.

“Dial Tone, this is important,” the voice shouted in his earpiece. “Listen carefully. The Shadow Viper project was just a field test! A living, breathing Petri dish to—“

“Woah, woah woah!” replied Dial Tone, obviously confused. “Shadow what project? Field test? What are you talking about?”

Down in the laboratory, Airtight flashed Wet Suit a look of concerned annoyance. “Wet Suit! You didn’t tell them about the Shadow Vipers?”

Wet Suit glared back at the yellow-garbed hostile environment expert. “Well, excuse me if I didn’t have time to debrief them while I was trying to avoid getting killed!”

Airtight sighed and leaned back to the receiver. “Dial Tone, can I just piggy back your signal to Ace in the Skystriker? Trust me, this is pertinent information!”

“Yeah, Airtight. Just give me a second…” The line went temporarily dead as Dial Tone prepared for connection. Airtight’s face was contorted a frantic look of desperation. Time was running out.

“Rhames, we have them pinned down!” shouted Viper Satchel, lowering his rifle briefly and slamming another clip in it.

“We do, kid. The Commander will be pleased.” Rhames did the same, then lifted the weapon again and fired it quickly.

“Move in!” a voice shouted from their right. One of the Crimson Guards had broken off from the pack of four guarding the door. He stared at the Vipers and pointed towards the stairwell. “We have the intruders pinned down…move in for the kill!” He shouted loudly enough for all Vipers to hear and they all stood and slowly began to shuffle forward, their rifles thrashing and blasting wildly. Two Siegies flanked the Viper group and the three by the door slowly moved along the other wall, their own assault rifles blazing.

“Can’t we just order them to give up?” Satchel asked as he moved forward. Rhames cast a nasty look to him behind his faceplate.

“Hush, kid! You don’t question the order of a Crimson Guard, got it?”

“Y..yeah…got it.” Satchel replied, quite obviously distressed. The weapons continued to bark and Leatherneck tried to inch his was back towards the stairs.

“They’re moving in!” he shouted, looking back at the Joes, crammed into the tight stairwell.

“We hold our ground!” Hawk shouted from the group in a solid, confident voice. The group marched forward, their gunfire smashing apart the small corner and getting only closer by the second.

Ace’s heart was like a hundred pound dumbbell in his chest, beating rapidly, yet hanging heavily. Wild Weasel had either already dropped the bomb, or was just about to. He could be fifty feet away and the Joe pilot wouldn’t even know it. An overwhelming feeling of failure and a deep dread soaked through the pilot’s uniform and seemed to attach to his muscles themselves. A part of his mind was concerned about Slipstream as well, but his life was inconsequential compared to the scores of life threatened by the lone Cobra Rattler. His radio crackled to life and Ace fought the urge to jump. He reached over and switched it on, playing the voice in his helmet.

“Striker One here,” he said simply.

“Ace? This is Airtight!” the voice replied. Ace grinned at the squeaky franticness of it.

“Got something for me, buddy?” he asked, his grin quickly fading, and not really thinking that Airtight had anything of use to him.

“Yeah, I got something for you, Ace. Please listen carefully, okay? This is very, very important.”

Ace’s eyes narrowed to a curious slit as he heard the voice in the radio. “I’m listening. What is it?”

“Wet Suit and I are in the Cobra laboratory inside the complex. I’ve been going through Mindbender’s files, and I found something crucial to stopping this threat.”

“All right. You’ve got my full attention.”

“Good. Apparently, after the Python Patrol experiments, Mindbender continued tinkering around, trying to find the perfect stealth device…one that could render someone or something completely undetectable.”

“Go on,” Ace said, adjusting some readings and guiding the Skystriker into a low right bank.

“They tested a new theory out on a group of soldiers here on Cobra Island called Shadow Vipers. Wet Suit had a run in with them and can first hand vouch for the successfulness of this new experiment.”

Ace’s eyes wandered over to his instruments as he brought the X-14 back into a straight path.

“Well, apparently, Mindbender refined this process and has duplicated it full scale.”

“I’m lost. What does this have to do with—?”

“The Rattler, Ace. Mindbender fused the Rattler and the device that it’s carrying with this process.”

“So it’s completely undetectable by radar?” Ace’s eyes grew wide as he realized what Airtight was saying.

“According to Wet Suit, it can’t be seen by any electronic devices whatsoever.”

“Well, sorry, man, but that does nothing for me. I’ve got hundreds of miles of water out here, I can’t possibly go over every foot by eye.”

“That’s the thing, Ace. I think I’ve got a way to see this.”

“Well, fill me in, Airtight. Time is of the essence.”

“If I remember correctly, you have the new sonar installed in your aircraft, right?”

“Check,” Ace replied, glancing down at the panel.

“Does it have a filtering device?”

“Sure. To filter out commercial airlines, ambient noise…human population. What of it?”

“I want you to switch on every filter and turn them up to max.”

Ace stared crookedly at the voice in his radio. “What?”

“Every one, Ace. Turn them all up as far as they can go.”

“That makes no sense…it will filter out all sound. The thing will be searching for…”

“…Absolute silence. Exactly. Please, Ace, it would take too long to explain. Please just do it!”

Ace noticed the urgency in the Joe’s voice and shrugged his shoulders. “You’re the expert. Here goes.” Ace flipped the switches and slid a series of small dials all the way to the right. The sonar screen warbled slightly, then faded, cleared up and displayed…nothing.

Ace sighed, his face looking exasperated. “Airtight, man. I’ve got nothing.” He banked slowly to the right as back on the island, Airtight leaned back in his chair; time itself crashing in on him.

The Vipers inched ever closer, the gunfire roaring. With shattering aggression, the paths of fire narrowed, zooming in on the stairwell and the lone Joe that crouched not five feet away. Leatherneck huddled in close to the console, bringing his legs up into his chest, trying to make himself invisible. Sparks slammed off of the hard floor, now only mere feet away. His eyes pressed tightly closed as they neared, and didn’t see the far wall as it shuddered violently. Milliseconds later he felt the whole room shake and pried his eyes open just in time to see the far wall turn a brilliant white for the fleetest of moments before it came blasting in with hurricane like force. The Joe couldn’t believe it even as the muffled explosion tore through the large, open room and huge jagged concrete slabs were thrown through the air by thick rolling clouds of smoke. The Cobras whirled around suddenly, spinning their weapons towards this unexpected new threat. Two Vipers were knocked to the ground by the force of the mysterious blast, but all others turned to face the source. The large uneven torn hole in the wall glared back at them like a single expressionless eye, revealing the thrashing rains and wild winds from outside. The wind slammed down on the wall and threw leaves and debris inside the room with huge, circular gusts, twirling the smoke around into tiny miniature tornadoes. All they could see was the wet darkness of night beyond the hole in the wall until suddenly a lone figure hurtled down and away, then halted its progress and swung swiftly forward hurtling through the large hole. He was dressed in tan and light blue, his skin a dark flesh, a thin green helmet pulled tightly over his head. Even as he seemed to hover motionless in the air he was unfastening the large assault rifle strapped to his chest, his face snarling and mean. With a swift jerk of his hand he fell free from the steel zip line and dropped a foot to the floor, his weapon opening fire with amazing ferocity even as he landed in a deep crouch on the balls of his feet with the grace of a gymnast. The quick barrage sent two Vipers tumbling, one flying back from his feet and rolling awkwardly, the other spun clumsily and dropped to the floor, his helmet bouncing off and rolling free.

“Take him out!” shouted one of them Crimson Guards, when suddenly the ‘him’ became ‘them’. A green/black streak came down and around in a tight arc and landed in similar fashion, his AR-15 bucking in his hand. A brown and black blur zipped down just after, his landing a little less graceful, but still smooth, and his small automatic chattered like gossip hounds at the hairdresser.

“That’s our chance!” Hawk shouted with authority. “Go go go!”

Leatherneck jumped from his crouch, his rifle shouting angrily, the other Joes falling in close behind, pouring from the stairwell, and closing in with vicious swiftness.

Satchel couldn’t understand what was happening even as the debris from the wall rained down at him with frightening speed. They’d been on the verge of victory, for what it was worth. But now…now the room itself was caving in and a man was flying through the hole and shooting fast. Satchel scrambled as bullets sprayed through the air, not caring who they hit or hurt, and as he glanced to the side, he saw Rhames catch a burst and go spinning down, his helmet rolling off.

“Rhames!” he shouted and ran over to his old friend, looking down into his wide, angry face. He ducked low as more men poured into the room and more gunfire zipped through the air. “Rhames! Hold on…you’re gonna be okay…”

“Shut up, kid,” Rhames said roughly, his chest heaving rapidly. Blood starting collecting on his chest, seeping through the flak jacket he wore. The assault rifle was swift and powerful.

“I’m…dying, kid. Right here right now.”

“B..but…the Commander said…”

“Said what, kid?” Rhames coughed as Satchel lifted his head for a second and looked around, making sure the bullets were flying far enough away.

“You’re name,” Satchel finally replied, grinning widely. “You’re name will be on the monument.”

Rhames stifled a chuckle, shaking his head with a cough. “Kid…there…ain’t gonna be…no monument. Get out, kid. Get out while you still…” he shuddered quickly, and then his chest stopped moving.

“No!” the Viper shouted, throwing his weapon to the ground. He stood, his arms flailing. “No! Please! No more violence! I surrender!” he shouted, stumbling around aimlessly. The Joes looked curious, but continued firing, their shots straying away from the frantic Viper.

“Foolish child!” a voice barked from behind the young man. Satchel turned and saw a Crimson Guard standing there, his weapon drawn. “Cobra doesn’t surrender!” his rifle exploded loudly, and Satchel’s chest stung suddenly like the combined sting of a million angry hornets. He stumbled slowly back, his mind confused, his eyes wandering. Then he fell with a dull thud next to his old, dead friend.

“Now that’s cold!” shouted Roadblock and stepped in, his Browning growling. The Crimson Guard grunted and was tossed back effortlessly, then skidded to a stop on the floor. His finger jumped off the trigger as his eyes scanned, but saw only lingering smoke and bullet holes.

“Clear!” Roadblock shouted from his side.

“Clear!” replied Leatherneck, over against the far wall.

“Clear!” this one was Hit & Run, crouched over near the gaping hole in the wall where he had swung in.

“Clear!” Hawk gave the final signal, walking in to the center of the room in firing position, swiveling skillfully on his heels. The Joes lowered their weapons and Hawk walked over to the three new comers, a smile spreading over his face. A wild wind blew drops of rain into the room, spattering the Joes with their wetness.

“Glad you could make it, Airborne,” Hawk said, smirking. The Native American helicopter assault trooper nodded and saluted stiffly. Hawk returned it.

“We would have been here sooner, sir. The weather was not cooperative.” He motioned towards the hole in the wall and a large brown shape slowly began to descend in behind it. The Tomahawk jostled slowly outside of the building, its propellers whipping up the fierce, gale force winds. From the cockpit, Lift Ticket and Wild Bill shot the thumbs up from their seats.

“You two!” Hawk shouted to Hit & Run and Alpine who had closely followed Airborne in the assault. “I thought I had you two on watch?” he asked, looking stern. “Care to explain yourselves?”

“We disobeyed orders, sir,” Hit & Run said simply and the General had to stifle a chuckle. He admired the kid’s tact that was for sure.

“Well, sir,” Alpine continued, looking slightly nervous. “The attack team finished off the goons in the basement and came back out just as the Tomahawk showed up. They took the watch, and we took a ride, sir. Low Light was very helpful in pinpointing your location.”

Hawk smiled. “Works for me, boys.” He turned and faced the other Joes as they stood before him, backs straight and weapons at the ready. The General cast a look towards the door in the corner, and then looked back at them. “Are we ready?” he demanded, focusing on the men, his eyes narrowing.

“Yes, sir!” they shouted, raising their weapons.

“You three, head back down and give our boys backup if they need it.” He pointed to the three newcomers and they reluctantly agreed. “Sorry, men, but we have to keep numbers trim. We don’t know how much room for maneuvering there is up there and we don’t want to be tripping over each other.”

“Or shooting each other,” piped in Roadblock with a laugh.

“Joke time’s over, boys,” Hawk said sternly and the men nodded their agreement. “Let’s finish this! Yo Joe!”

“Yo Joe!”

“Shoot!” shouted Airtight, slamming his fist on the console in front of him. He had been so sure. So convinced that he had the solution. But he had been wrong and now time was really running out. “What did I mi—“

“Airtight!” a sudden shout echoed from the radio receiver and Airtight almost jumped. It was an excited shout that was for sure.

“Go ahead,” he said uncertainly into the communicator, slipping the headphones over his uncovered head.

“Airtight, you’re a damn genius, kid!”

Airtight smiled. It sounded a lot like Ace. “I…I am?”

“I just got a blip at the edge of my screen. A weird, swirling blob of absolute silence sliding in towards the coast of the United States! My burners are fired and I’m moving in!”

Airtight jumped from his seat, the headphones yanking from his head and smacking into the console. “Wet Suit! We did it! Ace found the—“

The voice echoed in the earphones again, this time sounding a lot less jovial. Airtight stopped the celebrating and sat, pulling the phones back over his ears. “Ace? Please repeat,” he said urgently.

“Good God, Airtight…he did it. He actually did it.”

“W…what?” Airtight stammered, his voice choking in his throat.

“The bomb has been launched. Repeat, the bomb has been launched.”

The General let Roadblock go first as he swung open the door at the top of the stairs, but was greeted by complete silence. The hallway was dim, if not dark, its plush red carpeting an alarming antithesis to the bunker-like rooms on the previous floors. Ornate gold lamps adorned the wood paneled walls, set every four feet on down the hall. The ceiling must have been higher than he thought, as the walls seemed to stretch above into shadow, disappearing from view almost as designed that way. Roadblock led the way, with Hawk, Blackout and Leatherneck following. Dial Tone and Shockwave pulled up the rear, the blue-garbed S.W.A.T. specialist swiveling his automatic back and forth behind the group as they continued on. About thirty feet ahead, the hall pitched ninety degrees to the right, which was their destination. It was so close, the General could almost taste it, could feel it watering on his tongue, longing for a resolution to this lifelong conflict. Roadblock was about ten feet ahead now, his large Browning sticking out in front of him and passing from one wall to the other, in a calculated, careful arch. The twin red blurs shot from the ceiling like a cannon, hurtling to the plush carpet, then landed in skilled, swift crouches, one behind the big man and one just in front. Hawk stumbled back, his eyes popping open as the two men sprang from what seemed like nowhere and surrounded the heavy gunner. The General only had to get a quick glimpse and recognized them instantly, their intimidating image scarred into his brain. Immortals.

“You. Stop where you are,” the first Immortal growled, his voice rasping through his black and silver faceplate. He pointed a large black AK-47 at the small group of Joes while his partner did the same to Roadblock. The big man either didn’t see the second man or didn’t care as he showed no hesitation and swung his huge weapon like a fifty caliber baseball bat, slamming it into the second Immortal’s chest where it impacted with a short, sharp *CLANG!* Crimson Guard Immortals wore a deeper, darker red than their lower ranked cousins and were adorned with an elaborate metal chest piece for gunfire protection. The Browning’s thick barrel smacked against the chest plate, sending the Immortal stumbling back just from the shock. The large man shifted on his feet, swinging the heavy machine gun and let it roar with sudden, abrupt ferocity, the blasting sparks slamming into the Immortal at point blank range. He flew back from the force of the shot, metal shards and blood red scraps flying through the air, and fell to the carpeted floor, lying still. The first Immortal swung with the sound, raising his AK-47, but Hawk acted fast, lunging forward, tackling the dark red man around the waist. The Immortal stumbled forward slightly, but spun swiftly, slamming the general in the face with his rifle, knocking him back. He hauled down on the trigger and the Joes scattered as best they could. Shockwave lunged forward in desperation, but caught the brunt of the gunfire in the lower chest and right arm. He flopped clumsily in mid air and landed with an awkward thump, his right arm flailing under his shredded blue uniform. Leatherneck came up quick from his duck and pounded the butt of his rifle into the CGI’s ribs, stumbling him slightly. In one smooth movement, the Marine jerked up, catching him under the chin with the upstroke, and knocking his helmet slightly askew. Leatherneck moved in for another strike, but the Immortal was set and drilled a knee into his gut, then clutched the back of his uniform and drove him mercilessly into one of the paneled walls. Wooden shards broke free and sprinkled to the ground as Leatherneck fell, his face contorted, his head matted to his dark hair underneath. Blackout launched himself next, throwing himself through the air before he even really realized what he was doing, but the CGI saw him coming and adjusted himself, easily catching the young man and tossing him roughly to the carpeted floor. As he did this, Hawk moved in and swept his leg around, catching it behind the Immortal’s dark red calf. It struck hard and as he fell, Hawk was on top of him, his pistol drawn. He drove the barrel of the pistol into the Crimson Guard’s chest, right at the sternum, in between the metal plates and yanked on the trigger four quick times. The gun jerked and the shots rang loud in the silent hall, then the CGI lay still with the General hovering over him panting heavily. His face was twisted into an angry growl, sweat and blood running over the smooth flesh under his blond hair. He drew the weapon back as deep crimson soaked the red torso of the CGI and looked up at the almost stunned faces looking down on him and stood quickly, composing himself.

“Sorry, troops,” he quickly commented. “We are running out of time for finesse. Cobra Commander’s private office is straight up ahead, and I mean to get us there.” He scanned the hall and frowned when he saw Shockwave lying on the floor, clutching his injured arm. His vest was littered with bullet holes, but there seemed to be no serious injuries aside from the wounded limb.

“Can you walk?” Hawk asked, reaching down towards the SWAT Team member.

“Y…yeah. But go on ahead. I’ll b…be all right.” He reached into a pouch with his good hand and pulled out a bandage wrapped in plastic. “I’ll hang back, don’t worry, all right? I’ll make sure our exit is clear.”

Hawk grinned down at the fallen man and nodded. “Very good. The rest of you. Let’s move out!” He led the way, flanked by Roadblock and Leatherneck, with Blackout slowly lumbering next beside Dial Tone. They crossed the last twenty feet like men possessed, and were finally at their destination.

“C’mon, baby!” Ace shouted, the throttle driven down all the way. The afterburners screamed as the white jet zoomed through the dark night air, the strange warbling blobs drawing nearer on his sonar screen. The bomb had been launched, but only seconds ago. At that point Ace discovered that it wasn’t really a bomb per se. It didn’t drop, after all, Wild Weasel was still over the Gulf of Mexico. Instead it launched forward, towards an indicated target, but Ace had no idea where the target was or how long it would take the bomb to get there. He only hoped he could catch it. Suddenly, the larger of the two blobs broke away and turned, closing in on the Skystriker, but Ace tried to ignore it.

“You probably think you’re sneaking up on me, Weasel,” he said softly. “But I just have bigger fish to fry.”

Still the blob drew even closer.

“C’mon!” Ace shouted with desperation at his white jet, and suddenly the night was on fire.

Hawk ignored his teammates warnings and marched up to the solid oak paneled door first, he pistol clutched tightly to his chest. With a thundering kick, he blasted the wood door inwards, and charged in after it, his weapon drawn and ready, Leatherneck and Roadblock flanking him. He almost halted in surprise when he entered the chamber. Directly ahead, sitting calmly in his desk a few feet in front of the wide bay window sat Cobra Commander himself, his elbows on the wooden desk, and his fingers laced under his chin. A small young girl stood next to him, dressed in deep blue and black with a mask pulled tight over her face.

“Well, well, General,” he said surprisingly calmly. “We’ve been waiting.” He made a soft gesture and from three places, motion suddenly appeared. In the near corners against the wall with the door, a CGI sprung from each side, AK-47’s at the ready. At the same time, the young girl crouched lowly, and then flew forward with amazing strength and grace, a flash of silver streaking from her back. The Joes scattered as she came down on them, a sword drawn and thrashing. Hawk ducked and rolled, feeling the weight of the girl pass just over him and land in the center of the crowd. Her sword lashed out and Hawk heard a sudden, pained yelp, then saw Dial Tone stumble to the ground, clutching his chest. His machine gun thudded softly on the carpet as it dropped along with him. Leatherneck went immediately for the Crimson Guard on the left as Blackout moved in, his M-16 drawn and ready. On the right, Roadblock charged forward, wielding his M2 like a battle staff. Hawk swiveled quickly and shot his .45 with fierce accuracy, striking one of the CGI’s in the knee. He shouted and stumbled, and Roadblock was on him, slamming the back of his head into the thick wooden bookshelf behind him. The shelves splintered apart and the man dropped, thick novels dropping down on him from above. On the other side of the room, Leatherneck pinned the other CGI against the wall, his rifle pressed tightly against the man’s throat, his AK-47 pushed away. Hawk charged to his feet as the girl shifted and leaped at him, cold hard death in her eyes. Roadblock threw his massive frame through the air and intercepted the young girl with a vicious tackle, threatening to crush her under his huge bulk. She adapted amazingly well and rolled on her back, tossing the large man with little effort on to the floor. She spun and jumped smoothly to her feet as Roadblock moved in. Leatherneck dropped the still Immortal and turned as well, moving towards the young girl who stood in a powerful defensive stance, her sword drawn and at a sharp angle, reflecting the lights glistening from the ceiling.

“Freeze little girl!” Hawk shouted briskly and angrily and the masked girl spun, drawing a deep breath. Blackout and Hawk had Cobra Commander from the desk and at gunpoint. Hawk glanced over to her, an angry look crossing his face. “Leatherneck and Roadblock, grab her and hold her!”

She made a motion to resist, but squinted at her father, who stood proud despite being held at the end of a weapon. With a shrug she dropped the sword and the two men grabbed each arm tight, forcing her into immobility. Hawk glanced back at Dial Tone.

“You okay?” he asked loudly, but there was no answer. “Blackout,” he said, turning to the other Joe. “Go check on him.”

“Yes, sir,” Blackout replied, lowered his weapon and started to turn. Cobra Commander was fast and determined, quickly moving in. Suddenly, the young man’s M-16 was shot to the soft floor and he was grabbed by a fierce choke hold, drawn in close to the Commander, the cold hard steel of a pistol barrel pressed tightly to his temple. His helmet sat slightly askew and the Commander jerked the kid, dropping the metal and chrome to the floor, revealing the boy’s surprised and frightened face.

“Well…” Cobra Commander said softly, glee almost bursting in his voice. “Who’s in control now?”

Gunfire roared impossibly silent, blinding flashes clouding the Joe pilot’s well-trained eyes. The Rattler was closing in, its twenty-millimeter Gatling gun, settled just under the nose of the plane, roaring with a sudden brightness but a strange absence of sound. The Skystriker’s canopy shattered under the smashing impact of the scores of bullets, Ace wincing uncontrollably as they whipped through the cockpit and out into the night. His facemask was still pulled on tight and his breathing was regulated, so the atmosphere was of no bother to him. He brought the plane into a steep dive, but stayed in his track, keeping his eyes focused on the sonar screen. With a deep breath, he forced himself to continue onward, not to be sidetracked by the attacking A-10. There was only one purpose here, and even if it cost him his life, he had to complete the mission. The white jet jolted severely as a blast echoed from the right wing. Ace cast a glance outside his canopy as the deep blue plane, almost invisible in the dark night, bore down on him, its cannon blaring.

“C’mon, honey…hold it together…” the jet lurched again, and Ace knew that he had to do something, and he had to do something now. The strange blob on the radar skimmed in closer and closer to the coast of the United States and Ace knew that once there, even if it was off target, the blast could be devastating. With a quick dance of his buttons, he accessed the onboard computer on the X-14, a relatively new addition to it. As more gunfire pounded down on him from behind, he tapped briskly on the keyboard, frantically glancing at his instruments.

*Sparrow reconfigured*, the computer screen flashed and he grinned. It was a long shot, but it was this or nothing. He flipped the small hatch off of the missile launch switch and closed his eyes. His thumb slammed down on the switch and he banked suddenly away as another barrage of fire skimmed his tail. The final Sparrow missile popped from its hold and roared off into the night.

“Bird away,” he said quietly. “It’s up to you now.” He banked the plane around and roared towards the Rattler, his own guns firing.

“General! So glad you could make it, old friend,” Cobra Commander said, grinning widely underneath his flowing, regal hood.

“I’m no friend of yours,” Hawk replied grimly, his pistol still raised and hovering just feet away from the Commander’s face.

“As long as I have this boy by the throat, you’ll be my best friend, won’t you, Hawk?” He squeezed and shook Blackout slightly, who coughed, but remained standing.

“Don’t count on it.” The General’s face was stern and serious.

Cobra Commander’s eyes narrowed. “This isn’t a joke, General. This child’s life is in your hands.” A dull crunch of thunder and amazingly bright fork of lightning seared through the room from outside.

“And this child’s life is in *your* hands,” Hawk replied, gesturing towards the girl, but keeping his handgun pointed at the Commander.

“Why should I care about her? She is a subordinate, nothing more.”

“All right. Leatherneck, take her out,” he said seriously. The Marine nodded and drew up his rifle with his free hand.

Cobra Commander merely laughed. “Bluffing never was your strong suit, General. Please, just release the girl and depart. This battle is over.”

“No. It is not over.”

“General Hawk, whatever has gotten into you?” he cocked his head comically, but his pistol remained still at Blackout’s head. The Joe squirmed and wrenched, but the Commander held firm.

“That’s the problem, Commander. This battle. These battles. They’re never over. They won’t be over until one of us is dead.”

“Oh? Are you volunteering?” Cobra Commander chuckled, but Hawk’s face remained stoic.

“You’d best take this more seriously, Commander. The joke is no longer funny.” His pistol was firm and still, hovering in front of Cobra Commander’s covered face.

“Why bother with the macho, Hawk? I’ve won, don’t you see? The bomb has been launched, or didn’t you know?” his body jostled slightly as he spoke, but the choke stayed locked in.

“Yes, I am aware,” Hawk muttered as he scanned the room, finally noticing that it was devoid of any kind of mechanical device.

“Are you also aware that there is no way to stop it? It’s invisible, Hawk. Invisible. Like a ghost, it will strike and vanish like it never existed.” Another streak of lightning hissed just outside the bay window. Thunder shook the room.

“Quite like its victims, actually.” The Commander seemed to find this endlessly funny, his shoulders shaking with laughter. Blackout struggled a little more, but the Commander held fast.

“Be that as it may. There is nothing we can do about it now. We can only keep it from happening again.”

Cobra Commander seemed physically taken aback. “Goodness! What happened to your staunch heroism, General? Are you prepared to kill in cold blood?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Like the heavy weapon clutched in his tight fist, his gaze was cold and hard.

Cobra Commander studied his enemy quizzically. “You have confounded me, General. Your recent bout of cold bloodedness impresses even me. Wouldn’t be looking for a job, would you?”

Hawk didn’t reply, only kept the pistol aimed where it was. Suddenly, the radio strapped to Dial Tone’s back crackled with static. The communications officer lay still, but the radio burst to excited life.

“Dial Tone! This is Striker One! Repeat, this is Striker One! SuperFreak has been splashed, repeat, SuperFreak has been splashed! The bomb is dead in the water and Wild Weasel is high tailing it home. I am running low on fuel, and am returning to the Flagg. Striker One out.”

Cobra Commander’s eyes grew wide under the hood. Almost as wide as Hawk’s grin. All at once, his face seemed to cave in on itself, confident egoism collapsing into dark, glaring rage. His hand trembled, the weapon shaking in his grip.

“Oh, did you hear that, Commander?” Hawk asked, feeling an indescribable rush of freedom and relief course through every vain in his body. “It would seem your plan has gone up in smoke.”

“No! NO!” he screamed, the muscles in his neck bulging through even the baggy cloth of his uniform. “It’s not possible! We planned for *everything!*”

“You didn’t plan for us. For me.” Hawk’s glare retained its hard, steel edge.

The Commander smiled wildly again, throwing his head back and laughing. “Foolish, foolish man!” his voice crackled with a sudden frantic insanity. Hawk grew uneasy, locking a nervous glance with the young fellow Joe. “You’d really try to kill me? Kill *me?*”

Hawk remained in his shooter’s stance. “Wouldn’t even think twice.”

“You *can’t* kill me! You are in my world here, my kingdom! This is *my* island. I rule here, not you!”

His voice barked loudly, the cloth hood swaying under his chin. Small droplets of spittle ejected through the pores in the cloth and sprinkled onto the carpet.

“Kill me indeed! Look at me! *LOOK!* I am no meager man here! The lifeblood of the Cobra organization runs through my veins! I am Cobra! Cobra is *me!* As long as it exists, I live!”

“Metaphorically, maybe, Commander…but the physical…I plan to end that tonight.”

“Idiot!” Cobra Commander screamed, his voice growing in pitch and desperation. He thrashed wildly, jerking Blackout like a lifeless doll, his arms flailing loose at his sides. “Don’t you see? You can’t kill me, I am *GOD* here!”

Hawk’s glare narrowed to a pair of tight, dark slits. He cast an eye to Blackout who nodded softly, hoping the Commander wouldn’t notice.

“No, Commander,” Hawk said simply, his finger sliding from the trigger guard to the trigger itself. “You’re not immortal. You are no god.”

Blackout shifted, lowering his right arm slowly and easily. His fingers closed around it and he breathed a small sigh of relief and nervous anticipation.

“You may think you are. Your followers may think you are. But deep inside, Cobra Commander. Deep inside, at your core, you’re no better than me.”

“*Liar!*” Cobra Commander screamed, his finger tensing on the trigger of the pistol. Blackout moved swiftly, lifting his right arm quick and straight, and then flipped the switch, hoping beyond hope. The thin blue flame shot from the torch like a white-hot dagger, igniting with a soft hiss and crackle. Cobra Commander jumped back as the flame licked at the edge of his swaying hood and suddenly caught with a low, swift *WOOSH!*

“AGH!” he screamed, back pedaling quickly, the pistol dropping from his loose fingers, his hood now awash in an orange/yellow glow. Flame shot towards the ceiling, engulfing his whole head, blue cloth ripping away and fluttering in the air, rain pounding down on the window behind, the acrid stench of burning cloth and flesh permeated the air. He stumbled back, arms flailing, and his eyes wide behind the swiftly dissolving blue cloth of his hood.

“*FATHER!*” screamed the young girl, desperately pulling on her captors.

“You…you can’t do this!” Cobra Commander pleaded, stumbling around, his head now a roaring flame. His voice was mere whispers and gasps underneath the inferno. “Y…you *can’t*! I am a *GOD HERE!*”

“No, Commander.” General Hawk said softly, but firmly. This insane explosion of false godhood from the man had washed any hesitation away in dark blue.

 “You are just a man.” Hawk’s pistol roared with a deafening burst as a streak of lightning arced through the night sky behind the flaming figure of Cobra Commander. Thunder crackled throughout the sky as he stumbled back, Hawk’s pistol shouting again. Shell casings spurted from the barrel one by one as he hauled on the trigger, the Commander thrashing wildly under the attack.

“Do you hear me, Commander?” Hawk demanded, stepping closer, his pistol roaring in his ears. “You. Are. Just. A. *MAN!*” Each word was punctuated with a loud gunshot, Hawk shouting, almost as if trying to convince himself of the same thing. With a final powerful blast, blue cloth tore away from the Commander’s royal tunic, chased by a thin trail of smoke spiraling upwards. Cobra Commander shot violently backwards, his back striking the window just as another fork of lightning punctuated the impact. The glass starred with thin spider web cracks spreading out from behind the Commander as he struck in tune with a low slam of thunder from the raging storm. His frantic screaming had given way to a rasping, choking gasp. Hawk wasn’t sure, but it almost sounded like a grating, sandpaper laugh. Finally, the window shattered under the weight and he toppled over backwards, tumbling out into the empty, wet, dark night amidst the pelting rain and a final, almost deafening clap of thunder.

“*FATHER!*” the young girl screamed again, and suddenly she was loose. She dashed across the room with marathon speed, hit the desk and leaped like a gold medal gymnast. In a blue/black streak she was gone out the window, just behind her father, leaving only the echoing of the gunfire, the tinkling of falling glass, and the soft pitter-patter of the rainfall behind.

The sun rose slowly, pulled up from its cloudy slumber by the bright day of morning, casting its pinkish orange glow over the rippling gulf water. General Hawk stood on the rocky surface of the island, glancing out over the choppy surf, his pistol lodged back in his holster and his arms crossed pensively. Duke hobbled up next to him and joined his commanding officer in the pensive gaze.

“Any sign?” Hawk asked, still staring out into the light gray morning sky.

“No, sir. You don’t think he survived, do you?”

Hawk didn’t answer. He cast a look back at the Tomahawk helicopter, which hovered over the valley below. Lower down, Lifeline hovered over a body on a stretcher, as he prepared to load it into the helicopter.

“How’s Flint by the way?” Hawk asked softly, and Duke shook his head.

“Lucky. But not by much. Lift Ticket was chasing a hydrofoil after picking up Slipstream in the drink. The Moray got away, but they happened to see Flint face down in the mud. They grabbed him, but it’s still touch and go.”

“Recommendation?”

“If he heals, and he wants to, the team could use him, sir.”

“Agreed.”

The silence descended on the two men. Partners by choice and by design. They stood quietly, gazing over the gulf from the rocky peak.

“Do you regret it, sir?” Duke asked, glancing over to the General.

“What? Shooting him?” Hawk stopped for a moment and let the silence speak for itself. The clouds had broken and the sunlight was warm and inviting. “No. He forced me to it. I’d do it again.”

“Good.”

Once again, the silence was the loudest thing in the small world of Cobra Island. The seriously wounded had all been flown to the U.S.S. Flagg. The Joes had swept the island and mopped up any resistance left over, of which there was little. The prisoners were flown to the Flagg’s brig for questioning and to be held until they could be picked up by the military. Duke glanced up into the pinkish sky as it spread over the island, embracing it with fluffy cloud arms.

“Peaceful, huh?”

Hawk glanced at the first sergeant and nodded. “Yeah, peaceful it is. But at what cost, Sergeant? Two Joes…a team of Navy S.E.A.L.s…countless young men who just happened to be fighting for the wrong side. The President of our country? Yeah, it is peaceful, Duke. But this time, I think the price of peace was far too high.”

As if in agreement, the sun rose sharply, casting its warm glow over the two men who stood there in solemn silence watching the crashing surf.

# EPILOGUE

**A New Player**

The man sat back in his swivel chair, glaring intently at the papers folded in his hands. His phone rang sharply and he jerked upright in the chair, scooping up the receiver.

“DOD, Str---“

“I know who it is.” The voice was low and growling. With the slightest twinge of a Scottish accent.

“I thought I told you never to call me here,” the man in the suit barked, leaning forward in his chair.

“Since when do you make the rules in this little agreement?”

“Since it’s my butt on the line.”

“Relax, my boy…my phone lines are quite…secure.”

“Good.”

“I appreciate all that you’ve done for us over the years.”

“Is that what this is? A thank you?”

“Not exactly. You provided us with radar information and all sorts of other welcome, but highly restricted information. Yet, the Joes still struck us unexpectedly. Foiled our plans yet again. What is your explanation for this?” his voice was growing somewhat testy on the other end.

“I can’t possibly know everything, D—“

“Do not say my name.”

“I thought the lines were secure.”

“We appreciate your help. That does not give you free reign to sarcasm and jokes. We can still make certain people…disappear. It would do you well not to forget that.”

“I won’t. Really.” The man in the suit looked suddenly concerned. He rubbed a hand over his smooth face, which itched just slightly.

“Good to hear. I’m just letting you know that we’re not quite done with you yet.”

“So I gathered.”

“Be prepared for another call.”

Three swift raps echoed from the man’s wooden door with rippled glass window. He squinted but could only see Army green, and no details. “I have to go.”

“Very well.”

The phone clicked on the other end as the door swung open and the broad shouldered man strode confidently in, his General stars gleaming under the florescent light. The man set the phone down on its cradle and stood, smiling.

“General Abernathy!” he said warmly, extending a hand.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Hawk said, taking his hand and shaking it.

“No, not at all, sir. Please sit down.”

“No, that’s all right. I have to make this quick.”

“Fine then. Hey, congratulations on the Cobra Island campaign. Nice piece of work.”

Hawk’s eyes darted around the office nervously. “That is classified information, son. On the record, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The man sat back down in his chair and smirked. “Of course. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I was a little distressed when you didn’t return my message a few weeks ago. I was stopping by to make sure there’s no hard feelings.”

“No, of course not!” the man said genuinely. “It was…a bad time. That’s all.”

“Well, the invitation still stands.”

“Does it?” the man in black asked, leaning in closer.

“Of course.”

“Well, General, what can I say?” he leaned back slightly, his face beaming. “I’d be honored, sir.” He stood and once again extended his hand, which Hawk happily shook once again.

“Good to hear it, son!”

“So, when do you want me?”

Hawk started for the door, and then glanced back. “As soon as you can get the paperwork cleared.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“Good.” Hawk opened the door and slid out, and then slipped his head quickly back in. “Welcome back to the GI Joe team…Mercer.”

The man in black nodded briskly, saluted and was once again left to his thoughts.

###

THE END