**THE PRICE OF PEACE**

**Book One**

**Snake Bite**

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.

# CHAPTER ONE

**A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT**

They looked like cotton candy. Dipped in mud, rolled around in a dirt-covered driveway, then glued to the dark gray sky like a supernatural kindergarten project. They were thick, chunky dark clouds with a seemingly endless blast of torrential water dumping from them. The curtain of rain washed down diagonal to the roaring ocean water below; a churning, rolling sea of dark green underneath the barely moonlit sky. In this area of the Gulf of Mexico, the water was devoid of ships, partly due to weather, but mostly due to legend and folklore. Mossy green water smashed down onto the rocks of the island, a lone land mass in the empty sea. The terrain was rocky, jagged and unforgiving. Local storytellers speak warily of this island, nervous tales of danger and death. Many local fishermen disappeared near it, and this minor fact escalated into tales of sea creatures and Bermuda Triangle type mysteries. The men who steer clear are wise men; because whatever stories have been concocted about the island only partially do the place justice. It is an island of danger and death. An island of mystery and evil. Cobra Island. It is not a large body of land, but is still a very intimidating one. The shores are rocky and uneven. No sandy beaches or palm trees. No life guard stations or beach houses. Only stone shores and vacated machine gun nests surround it. Even inland, the picture does not change. Corpses of buildings lie scattered about the countryside. Ruins and rubble, smashed concrete and pulverized asphalt. It appears to be a graveyard for military institutions, bunkers and airfields, hastily constructed shortly after a major battle, with no time for proper burials for the unfortunate victims. The land is absent of life. Wildlife has practically abandoned the place, and no humans could possibly survive on whatever is left of vegetation and animals. Only one building stood, a proud god overseeing his battered and broken minions who lie smashed and crumbled on the ground. A tall, thick concrete bunker-like tower jutting up to the black sky, a single window peering over the crashing seas. Looking over its domain. A thundering boom echoed across the empty ocean just as a blue-white fork of electricity plunged from the heavens.

"Tempt me no more; for I have known the lightning’s hour, the poet’s inward pride, the certainty of power."

The man stood in the large, open window, staring out to see. No lights shone in the room, leaving it in a dirty darkness, lit merely by crescent moonlight. The room sat atop the large tower, with only one window. A large, stone fireplace was against the east wall, yet no fire was lit. There was a dark, thick maroon carpet from wall to wall, a desk, many books in bookshelves, and few pictures adorning the walls. It appeared to be the typical office or den of any home. Another bolt of lightning scorched through the air and briefly illuminated the darkened room.

"A bit…melodramatic, don’t you think, Commander?"

The man framed by the large window turned slightly, chuckling as rain pounded against the thick glass. A low rumble of thunder bellowed in the distance. His hood swayed fluidly over his broad shoulders as another flash of lightning reflected white barbs in the squinting eyes just behind.

"Now, Destro…there is little either of us have done over the years that wouldn’t have been considered melodramatic."

"Correct you are."

The Commander turned back to the window, seemingly at peace with the raging weather beyond. "Tell me, my friend," he began plainly, not turning. "What brings you back into the fold? Certainly your past visit with the Brainwave Scanner has not had a permanent effect on you?"

"You know me by now, Cobra Commander. I have certain loyalties."

"Yes, I know. Those loyalties have put us at odds in the past. Loyalties and your accursed honor."

"Even among thieves and villains, honor must have its place."

"Overrated if you ask me." The Commander inhaled and finally turned from the window just as another streak of white barreled down onto the shore behind the tower. The lightning once again illuminated the room, sending a sharp glare from Destro’s beryllium steel silver helmet. Cobra Commander squinted and spoke again. "You still did not answer my question."

Destro ran a black leather gloved hand over the metal covering his face. A family tradition for the McCullen clan of Scotland. Once a vicious punishment was now a sign of pride and honor. "I may have my loyalties, Commander, but I still have…expenses. Running a weapon manufacturing empire does not come cheap.

"Ahh…as always in this blasted capitalist world…it just boils down to the almighty dollar."

"Besides, Commander…you have calmed a bit lately. Frankly, you are much easier to be around."

The Commander chuckled yet again. "I’m not sure whether to thank you or to have you shot where you stand. I do agree, however. My past ambitions have been somewhat lofty."

"Attainable goals are so much more gratifying."

Cobra Commander turned back towards the window, gazing longingly into the black night. He could barely see through the wall of pouring rain, and the rumbling thunder vibrated the glass pane of the window. "We are close to initiation, Destro. So very close."

"Yes, Commander. All has progressed smoothly so far. But we still have a few shipments we are waiting on."

"Back to basics, my friend. That is what will ensure our victory."

"Trained men and weapons of destruction."

"Yes. We were outgrowing ourselves, I think. This cut back and regroup was a necessary step towards our ultimate success."

"Is the core group back on board?"

"All of the surviving ones anyway," Cobra Commander said, turning his head slightly. In the distance he could barely make out the large mountain jutting from the surface of the island. He almost smiled when he remembered the freighter buried underneath.

"No hard feelings?"

Another chuckle. The Commander appeared to be in a very good mood. Lightning flashed again, a jagged white streak gashing across his sparkling pupils. The room was bathed in brightness for a split second, and then dipped back into the inkwell of night. "Like you, Destro, they were surprisingly forgiving for the right price."

"The Baroness and I are definitely onboard. May I ask who else has confirmed?"

"Doctor Mindbender of course. He is in the laboratory section right now, working on some…projects. These new projects could alone turn the tide in our favor."

"What about Zartan?"

"Zartan and the Dreadnoks have also agreed to my terms. At the moment I believe they are in the training room with some of the new recruits teaching them the ins and outs of violence and wanton destruction."

Destro took a step towards Cobra Commander, crossing his arms. "Speaking of destruction, what about Firefly? Did you contact him?"

"Firefly was a challenge. His reputation was quite tarnished by that imposter in the garish green outfit using his name."

"Imposter?" Destro leaned closer.

"Oh, yes…that was just a renegade ninja from the Arashikage clan who thought he could use his name to take control over the clan and to have Storm Shadow killed. That was no more Firefly than Fred VII was me!"

"Interesting…so what happened to the imposter?"

"Firefly caught up with him. Apparently all the ninja skills in the world can’t defend you from a well placed shaped charge under the engine block of your ’78 Pinto."

This time it was Destro’s turn to laugh. "But Firefly has joined up, then?"

"To a certain extent. He is being paid to a Swiss Bank account and is not officially employed by Cobra, but he has already completed phase one of our plan."

"And that is?"

"He has ensured the safety of our first shipment from Trans Carpathia. Raw materials and supplies to begin rebuilding our army of H.I.S.S. Tanks and Rattlers. Like you said, we still await a few shipments, but we are on the verge of completion. The men have been recruited and trained and the bulk of our machinery is up and running. This will be a great day for the Cobra organization! The best part is no one even knows we exist!"

"Hopefully we can keep that advantage, Commander. But much can change in one week. I have certain things I must attend to. We are expecting a shipment any time now. I will leave you to your thunder storm."

"Very well, Destro. I will see you in the morning. Tomorrow you, The Baroness, Scrap Iron, Doctor Mindbender and I will go over the rough draft of our plan. Seven days and counting until our victory is complete."

Destro nodded and turned then left the darkened room. Cobra Commander stood there alone still framed by the window. Another flash of lightning lit the room, revealing a young girl standing next to the Commander. She looked up at him and he turned to look down at her. Long, jet-black hair ran to her shoulder blades, and her slim form stood to just about five and a half feet. She turned her head towards the doorway to make sure Destro had left.

"Can he be trusted?" she asked, scowling.

"Don’t worry, my dear…I have faith in him."

"Just give me the word. I will take care of him."

"Whisper, my sweet…believe me, you will be the first to know."

"I am ready for the first part of the plan."

"Have patience. The time will come soon enough. But sooner than anyone realizes. You are the key, Whisper. For the past eighteen years you have trained for this moment. This is your time in the sun. Do not let me down."

"Don’t worry, Father. I don’t plan to."

Cobra Commander smiled behind his billowing blue hood and bent slightly to hug his daughter.

# CHAPTER TWO

**CLUES**

Dusk was setting in half a world away over a scene of barely organized chaos. The light gray sky was normally peaceful this time of day, but two helicopters, one news and one police, buzzed the area repeatedly like two very stubborn extremely noisy flies.

"At approximately four p.m. today, the small group of men was sighted unloading questionable merchandise at Warehouse Number 43, which you see right behind me." The news reporter gestured backwards from the camera as the cameraman tried to zoom in as much as possible over the scattered yellow barricades and the hustling police officers. He focused on a large, nondescript brown brick building with numerous windows, though most were boarded. There were two floors, and each floor appeared to have six windows facing the crowded area that was once the parking lot. "They were approached by two uniform police officers, who were apparently shot and killed. They managed to make a call for backup before being fired upon."

"For crying out loud," huffed Lieutenant Faria as he flipped off the portable television and settled back in the seat of the van. "As usual, the flippin’ press knows more than we do." He stood, turned and faced the small crowd of men that sat with him in the cramped quarters of the back of the armored van. It was parked in a separate lot a hundred yards away to keep attention from them and to keep the terrorists and the press guessing. The group was small, six men, including Faria, but was by far the ace S.W.A.T. Team in the northeast. Their success to fatality rate was incredibly good, used as a marker for other S.W.A.T. Teams to try and emulate. Their team was small for a reason, they were the best of the best, and not just anybody could handle what they had to handle on an almost daily basis.

"All right, LT…what’s the plan of action?" Gallows asked. Gallows was the ‘door kicker’ for Team One. First one in, last one out. Faria had been the ‘door kicker’ for more operations than he could remember, but his job as Team Leader made that position impossible. Still, on almost every operation he was the second one in, and usually let Gallows leave the scene before he did.

"Basic enough. Infiltrate and eliminate. This is not a hostage situation and we have dead officers on our hands. These men have already proven that they mean business and they take no prisoners. Today, men, we are going to fight fire with fire."

"Do we have any clues what was in those crates they were loading?" This question came from Jameson, the S.W.A.T. Team’s explosive expert and heavy machine gunner. It was a smart question and one asked by the right person. If Jameson was going to be chucking grenades and blasting off 7.62 millimeter "hardballs" he needed to know what not to aim for.

"Unfortunately, Jameson, we do not. Aim smart, try to stay away from mysterious looking crates, and I would say grenades are a no go for this op." Faria scoped out his men and could almost taste the tension settling in. "Now before we make a solid plan, we have a gentleman here who is going to educate us on what we may be dealing with here. This is Lieutenant Frank Kage from the L.A.P.D. S.W.A.T. Team division." The man sitting on the long seat just behind Faria stood and nodded to the other men. Just being a member of the L.A.P.D. was enough to garner respect from these men, seeing as how the Los Angeles Police Department was the birthplace of Special Weapons and Tactics, code named S.W.A.T.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I am here in an advisory capacity only to help you figure a good plan of action for these terrorists you are going to be dealing with. Do not be mistaken, these men are trained killers, pure and simple."

"So are we, sir," remarked Lexington, one of the gunners. He smiled slightly.

"This is no joke, trooper!" Kage’s eyes scowled inward, his brow furrowing and his lips parting. "You do not know who you’re dealing with in there. I do."

The men shifted nervously in their seats, but kept their attention focused directly on Kage. "My team dealt with these particular operatives about three weeks ago. Like you, we knew what we were doing. Like you, we were the best of the best. I am now the only member of L.A.P.D. S.W.A.T. Team One left alive." He stared at the men letting this tidbit of information settle in to their brains. Since that fateful op, Frank Kage had not been in action once. The loss of one member of a S.W.A.T. Team can be devastating to the team. The loss of the whole team…well, Franklin Kage had not slept a full night’s sleep since that day. When he saw the news report originating from Hartford, Connecticut, he immediately went to the scene. He had fortunately been in New York teaching a class on Urban Warfare, so the trip was not a long one. "Do not underestimate these men. They will kill you as soon as look at you. They are skilled, they are dangerous, and they are ruthless. They do not care about their own well being, only their cause."

"What is their cause?" asked MacBride. He was the sniper of Team One, and arguably the best in the world. Faria and he had served together in a previous assignment, and when their old team disbanded, both were transferred to the Washington D.C. S.W.A.T. unit. A short time later, they helped form a roving, regional S.W.A.T. Team for the northeast area of the country designed to be available to those areas that needed more help than their own police department could handle.

"I wish I knew. Our raid in Los Angeles was ineffective for two reasons. We lost many men, and the bastards got away with whatever they were loading. No evidence, no crime."

Faria turned away from the blueprints he was reading and looked at Kage. "What advice do you have for us, Frank?"

"Hit them hard and fast. Don’t give them time to react. You have to have a ruthlessness to match theirs. This is kill or be killed, Lieutenant Faria. Please remember that."

"All right, this is the plan of action, gentlemen." Faria pulled up the blueprints and tacked them to a bulletin board fastened to the wall of the van. Just under the prints was a map of the surrounding buildings. "MacBride, you’re stationed here." Faria tapped a pointer at the roof of Warehouse Number 45, just across the street from the target. "I want full thermal scans and image intensified reports of who is who and who is where a full hour before he hit them. That means now, MacBride, go!"

Cooper MacBride saluted hastily, and grabbed his thick gun case as he slipped out the back door of the van. Even with the slightest bit of sunlight, MacBride was nearly invisible in his urban camouflage and black Kevlar vest. Of course, Cooper MacBride had a knack for making himself invisible, which is what had made him so useful as a sniper for the GI Joe team.

"All right. Gallows, you, me and Rogers will hit the front door. You use the ram, I’ll be right behind you, and Rogers will cover us. Jameson, you and Lexington have the back entrance. The bottom floor is a wide, opened area with eight pillars to hold the second floor up." Faria pointed to eight little red spots on the blueprints. "These will be our only available cover, so remember where they are! We will coordinate the attack so that Jameson and Lexington blow the back door first to draw a diversion. Then the both of you throw some flash bangs, hopefully to disorient any nearby hostiles. As soon as we hear the bangs, Gallows, you’re taking us in. I don’t care how thick that front door is, you have to take it down in one shot."

Gallows nodded and patted the handheld battering ram draped across his legs.

"Now, there’s a good chance they may be setting up an aircraft to come and pick up the stuff from the roof. That is exactly what we want them to do. If we can drive them to the second floor and the roof, then MacBride can pick his targets and we have them cornered. So, Lieutenant Kage, I need you to put a call in to pull all aircraft from the immediate vicinity. They may have heavy artillery, and if they want the airways cleared, they may do it themselves. Now, in the rear corners here and here," Faria once again used the pointer to illustrate, "we have two staircases which flank a freight elevator. For obvious reasons, we don’t take the elevator, but keep in mind that the stairways may be heavily guarded. It will be close quarter combat at its worst. Luckily, we’ll have MacBride and his prototype thermal scope in constant radio contact to feed us info about hostile locations." Jason Faria stood and set down the pointer. He crossed his arms over his blue Kevlar vest. His fatigues were somewhat different from the other members with faded blue under his blue vest, and darker blue and yellow camouflage patterns on them. He had two pistols in holsters, one strapped to each thigh, and the boots he wore were still the same metal plated ones he wore as a door kicker for GI Joe. His blue cap was turned backwards over his tussled black hair, and he quickly removed it. "Are we ready, Team One?" he asked, pulling a knitted mask from his back pocket.

"Yes, Sir!" came the unanimous reply.

Jason Faria pulled the blue knitted mask over his head, just leaving his eyes and bridge of his nose in plain view, then pulled the cap back on, right side around. Now he felt like he was home again.

"Then let’s gear up and move out!"

"I need a SitRep, MacBride," Faria whispered into the walkie-talkie built into his knitted face- mask. "Give me locations and info; we’re almost ready to hit ‘em." Faria was running in a low crouch approaching the front of the building. Gallows was close on his heels with Rogers pulling up the rear. They were sticking close to the wall of Warehouse Number 43, and were in the shadows. As far as they could tell, the news reporters hadn’t even seen them, and they were only a hundred feet away. Faria hoped the men in the building were equally blind.

"I’ve got thermal readings…four hostiles on the bottom floor, they seem to be patrolling. All windows on the bottom floor are boarded, so no chance of being spotted. The top floor has six hostiles. One at each of the three unbarred windows, one at the top of each stairway and one more, who looks to be crouched and inspecting the merchandise." MacBride pulled his face away from the large round scope planted on the top of his .50 Caliber Beretta sniper rifle. The gun was simply huge, almost the length of the man lying behind it. Normally Cooper MacBride preferred smaller, bolt action single shot rifles, but this was a potentially more dangerous situation and required a weapon that could penetrate brick walls if needed. The weapon rested on a thick bipod, and the prototype scope followed the barrel almost to the end. MacBride twisted a small dial on the side of the scope; slightly adjusting the focus of the thermal imaging device which he had helped design. He hoped that eventually all police departments would have them standard issue. It would help save lots of lives, but at the moment it was just too cost prohibitive. He moved his knitted capped head just to the left, and lowered his infrared goggles over his eyes. With one hand he slowly stroked his thick black beard as he adjusted the magnification. He saw the first group, named Alpha Team approaching the front door. He went back to the thermal scope on the rifle, and quickly located Beta Team setting up by the rear of the building.

"Almost go time," he said in a harsh whisper and centered his sniper rifle on the second floor in a central location in case he needed to pick targets. Down at the building Faria slowed to a halt by the metal windowless front door. He lifted his hand in a signal to stop, and the two other members of Alpha Team obliged. Gallows slowly crouch-walked past the team leader and positioned himself to take down the door. Faria checked his watch, then lifted his Heckler and Koch Model MP-5 fixed stock submachine gun into firing position. Rogers took the cue and did the same. Gallows ran a hand over his Mauser automatic shotgun, just to verify that it was easily accessible. Faria held up his hand, showing five fingers, as all three men listened intently for their cue. He slowly began closing his fist, one finger at a time. Four. Three. The muffled bang could be heard barely through the metal door. Team Beta had blasted in. Faria heard MacBride’s frantic voice in his earpiece.

"Team Beta is moving, repeat Team Beta is moving! Four hostiles have moved to engage!"

Faria held up two fingers, then lowered to one, then clenched and shook his fist. That was the cue. Gallows charged forward reeling the ram back, and then plunging it forward as hard as his chiseled arms could muster. The metal door buckled and crashed inward, with Gallows leaping in first. He dropped the ram, and lifted the Mauser into firing position. Faria and Rogers followed immediately after, lowering their heads to avoid getting the brunt of a flash bang. The bangs quickly went off, leaving the four targets stumbling and firing randomly at no one in particular. Faria took a quick assessment of the situation. Four men dressed in blue and black fatigues with large assault rifles. Each man wore a blue combat helmet and had a black bandana wrapped around the lower part of their face. They looked disturbingly familiar to Faria, but he had no time to worry about it. He quickly lifted his MP-5 until a head completely filled the circular sight mounted on the barrel of the firearm. Barely even thinking, he hauled back on the trigger, feeling the weapon buck wildly in his hand. Superior skill kept the weapon trained even as it struggled against his grip. The target jerked wildly and fell in a heap. The silencer muffled much of the noise, resulting in a quiet multitude of whispers echoing from the gun. At the rear of the building, Jameson charged forward, lifting his silenced M-16 assault rifle. He was used to something heavier, but time was more important than power for this particular op. The gun rattled off a barrage of gunfire, Jameson carefully walking the path of death towards the two closest men. One went down under a hail of 5.56 millimeter, but the other one turned to try and escape, only found himself face to face with Gallows, who appeared quite intimidating in his black ski mask. He let loose with the Mauser, blasting a plume of smoke from the barrel. The weapon kicked violently, but still struck its target in the upper chest and lower face, sending him flying and stumbling backwards. The last man was the most disoriented, spinning clumsily and firing haphazardly. Rogers and Lexington caught him in a vicious crossfire and took him down with extreme prejudice.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Clear"

"Clear!" The five men barked their signal to show that their respective targets had been neutralized, and also that they were clear and unharmed. The whole assault had lasted about twenty seconds. Faria resorted back to hand signals to assign Lexington and Gallows to one stairway while he and Rogers would take the other. Jameson hung back as backup to make sure no more hostiles were hiding on the bottom floor. A thin wooden door opened into the stairwell on each side of the freight elevator. The stairwells were nightmares of close quarter combat. There was a thin shaft leading to the second floor, and the stairs wound up in a V shape with no cover, not even a railing. The shaft led to another door at the second floor, which would definitely have people waiting. The silenced weapons had hidden the S.W.A.T. Team from the second floor, but the explosives to enter the building and the flash bangs had definitely alerted them to their presence.

"Sniper-One to Leader-One…advise do not climb the stairs, repeat do not climb the stairs. There are now two men at each stairwell, aiming directly down. Advise you to let me take care of them." MacBride’s short whisper emanated from the earpiece.

"Leader-One to Sniper-One, acknowledge. Make it quick."

"Affirmative." MacBride adjusted the scope slightly and brought the weapon to bear on the right staircase. Because they had reinforced the defense at the stairs, it left the windows unguarded, and there was a clean line of fire through them. MacBride could blast through the brick wall if he wanted, but the impact would throw the bullets trajectory way off, and he wanted a straight shot. He had to be quick.

"Sniper-One to Leader-One…give me ten, then rush the right stairway. All of you."

"Acknowledged." Faria motioned the men to converge on the right stairway, Gallows leading the way, with Rogers and Faria flanking him. Jameson and Lexington hung back as cover.

*I’ve got ten seconds,* thought MacBride as he zeroed in on the door to the right stairwell. He placed the crosshairs between the two soldiers and got a good look at them for the first time. The resemblance was uncanny, but now was not the time to jump to any conclusions. His finger hovered stock still over the trigger as every muscle in his body slowed to a halt. He became one with the concrete roof and merely an extension of his weapon. With a swift jerk he moved the rifle quickly right and squeezed off a shot, sending a loud reverberating *KER-ACK!* through the air. Before even checking to see if he’d hit the first target he swiveled left, quickly centered, and before the other terrorist could react, he pounded a .50 slug through his head, almost obliterating it with a single shot. He now scanned back over and saw that his first shot had been successful as well. The bullets had passed through the windows like a hot knife through butter and there were now only four men left. MacBride switched back over to thermal, and pulled the magnification back to scan the entire second floor. The four men were scrambling for cover as Alpha and Beta Team charged through the door of the right stairway firing well aimed shots. There was a quiet whisper in the air suddenly, and MacBride had to look away from the scope to check the area. He’d become so enthralled with taking out the two targets; he hadn’t heard the noise until now. He rolled over onto his back, squinting in the darkness, and pulled his goggles up off of his eyes. The wind was picking up, little tornadoes spinning dirt and pebbles into the air in a circular motion. A small, black helicopter roared from seemingly out of nowhere over the roof of Warehouse Number 45 where MacBride was lying. It whipped up a vicious wind and just as it passed his prone body it spun and blasted the area with a bright spotlight. MacBride cursed as the ‘copter hovered shakily in the air, weaving slowly back and forth, the light blasting into his eyes. Suddenly, the front mounted cannon rattled off a barrage of twenty-millimeter gunfire. He jumped to his feet and swiftly dove behind an air duct that jutted from the roof of the warehouse. Bullets clanged and banged off of the metal surface, and MacBride had to keep his head down to avoid losing it. He looked around the duct when the firing stopped and saw that the helicopter was now continuing towards the roof of the other warehouse. It was a jet black, small helicopter with dark gray propellers. A single man piloted it in an uncovered canopy. The design was quite unmistakable, although it could have been bought at an open weapons sale that terrorists sometimes participate in to fund the cause. Suddenly three more single man helicopters roared past him towards the other one, and they slowly began to settle down onto the rooftop. These new models seemed to have some limited stealth capabilities, which bothered MacBride. A hack terrorist front could never afford such modifications. *Who are we dealing with here?* Sniper-One ran back to his position at the rooftop, and cursed under his breath. The fifty caliber was smashed and broken on the roof, apparently battered by errant gunfire. Or was it? Maybe that was the target all along, to prevent MacBride from giving cover fire to Team One. He slipped off his backpack and pulled the flap open, then pulled out a modified Uzi submachine gun. A long silencer extended from the barrel and an equally large thermal scope protruded from the top of the magazine. He cocked it quickly and scowled. "A good sniper always has a back up." He crouched down on one knee and leveled the weapon at the four helicopters.

Inside the building, there was a stalemate. Team One was stuck in the doorway coming out from the stairwell as the four remaining attackers had set up a line of defense concentrated on that area. There were piles of wooden crates scattered throughout the second floor that the terrorists were using for cover. Unfortunately for Team One the nearest stack of crates was fifty feet away over open area. Not an option.

"Where’s Sniper-One?" Gallows asked nervously, wondering why these hostiles weren’t getting picked off one by one. They heard a scraping on the roof above, which seemed to answer their question.

"Sounds like something’s landing up there," Faria pointed out, then quickly ducked behind the side of the doorway as a path of lead chewed up the wall next to him. One of the terrorists broke off his attack and ran to the far corner. Faria squinted at him as he climbed a stack of crates, then planted something on the ceiling.

"What the hell?" Faria wondered, until a shattering blast cleared it up for him. The ceiling flew apart into chunks of concrete and plaster, revealing a gaping hole staring out into the night sky. A hook and cable descended through the hole and down towards the floor.

"Shoot! We can see what they’re up to, but we can’t do a darn thing about it!" Gallows pounded his fist into the wall. "If we move, we’re toast!"

"Some of those crates look heavy. I have a feeling it will take more than one guy to load them onto those cables. Maybe if they thin their force enough, we’ll be able to shoot through."

MacBride squinted through the sight at the helicopter hovering above the hastily made hole in the roof. A cable was dropping, evidently to pick up whatever was in the crates in that warehouse. He centered the scope on the head of the pilot, just under the helmet and above the mask, right between the eyes. Before he could pull the trigger, another ‘copter swept up and spun around, then launched a ski mounted thin red missile at the hapless sniper. MacBride’s eyes grew wide as the rocket hurtled through the air towards him. He hurled himself clumsily over the sharp edge of the roof, toppling forward into nothingness. His stomach thrust itself into his throat as he began to plummet, his arms flailing wildly, as if trying to grab onto invisible handholds. The thin missile streaked closer, and MacBride could almost see the little blast of orange flame shooting from the back of it. Everything was moving in slow motion as he seemed suspended in open air, then began the fall. His hopes rose as he spotted a metal fire escaped about ten feet own, mounted to the side of the warehouse. He twisted surprisingly gracefully, desperately aiming for the safety of the metal stairway. Sniper-One’s adjustment was unfortunately a little off, and instead of landing on the fire escape, he struck the metal railing ribs first. Pain ripped through his side as he hit the metal banister, then somersaulted awkwardly forward and landed on the first level with a dull thud. A thundering boom echoed above him as the missile struck the roof and sent debris showering into the air. MacBride could only curl into a ball as pieces of rock and concrete dumped down on top of him, and buried him in the rubble.

A second man finally ran to assist the first, and Faria thought that the moment had come. There were only two men defending now, and each one only carried a small machine gun instead of the large assault rifles carried by some of the others. Two crates had been removed and apparently flown off, but there was now another cable dropping. Faria had a feeling it was now or never.

"Jameson, get up here with the M-16! I want you to rush the hostile to the right while Roger and Lexington engage the one on the left. Me and Gallows will drive up the middle and try to take out whatever is lifting those crates out of here. Acknowledge?"

"Yes, sir!" the four men shouted their reply, and the plan was in action. Jameson charged from the doorway, firing a blast of gunfire from his M-16 as he ran. The terrorist seemed surprised and faltered a little bit, then went down under the fierce gunfire. The defender on the left shifted his aim to try and take out Jameson, but Rogers and Lexington were on him in a flash and quick bursts from their MP-5’s took care of him. Gallows and Faria charged down the middle of the room, quickly gaining on the two men now loading the last crate. Gallows fired his Mauser and one of the unsuspecting terrorists shouted and fell face first. The second one looked and saw the oncoming team members. He sucked in a breath and lifted his weapon.

"I will be remembered by the legions of followers! Hail the power of C—" a burst of fire from Faria’s machine gun cut off his noble speech and dropped him to the floor. The crate was slowly going up towards the opening in the roof and into the night sky. Faria quickly leapt to the stack of crates just under the hole and scrambled up them, making it to the ceiling in no time. He crawled through the hole and was up on the roof just as the last helicopter began to pull away. He lifted his weapon and pulled the trigger hard, peppering the small aircraft with deadly lead. A lucky shot shattered the tail rotor, and the ‘copter began to spin. The pilot looked around nervously as the helicopter descended beyond his control. The engine sputtered as fuel leaked from the bullet holes and the aircraft spun wildly.

"Bail out, you dumb fool!" Faria screamed at the pilot. The helicopter was only about ten feet from the roof, so a jump would not have been fatal.

"I will serve my leader well! You will not get any information from me!" with a shout, the pilot threw himself from the cockpit, but not towards the roof. He leapt over the edge of the warehouse and disappeared down into the night sky. Small screams could be heard from the parking lot as he apparently landed amidst news reporters and onlookers. The helicopter sputtered one last time and slammed down onto the roof, metal tearing and concrete crunching. Faria had been joined by the rest of Team One, and they charged towards the ‘copter.

"Get that crate free before the fuel ignites! Go, go, go!"

The five men grabbed the crate and yanked it free of the cable, then pulled it to the hole in the roof, and dumped it back in. They quickly followed just as a spark ignited the gas tank and the small helicopter went up in a brilliant orange cloud.

Faria began barking orders to his men. "Rogers, Lexington, go across the street and see if you can find MacBride! Jameson, check this crate for booby traps, and Gallows, you cover the rest of the warehouse and make sure all hostiles are neutralized."

"Yes, sir!" came the simultaneous cry.

MacBride was found and treated for superficial wounds soon later. Jameson and Faria pried open the crate and what was inside confirmed Faria’s suspicions, although Jameson had no idea what he was so worked up over. Just to make certain, Faria thoroughly scanned the lid of the crate. He soon found what he feared he would. There was a small plaque on the inside corner of the crate with four simple letters, but a very dangerous meaning. M.A.R.S.

# CHAPTER THREE

**SMOKE SCREENS**

 The rain had stopped, but a fierce wind still tore through the corpses of the buildings that used to make up Cobra Command on Cobra Island. The skies were now clear and bright, although the clouds still retained their dirty, gray look. Three Fang helicopters zipped just above the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, then darted between demolished buildings and finally came to a rest on the paved surface of the former Cobra Airfield; wooden crates nestled snugly between their skids. The hangers were crumbled and destroyed. The control tower was cracked at the halfway point; the top half was toppled over and rested at a forty-five degree angle to the support column. No soldiers came to greet them, no congratulations, and no pats on the back.

"Rotor-Viper One to Tele-Viper Team. Open hanger doors…we have six minutes to geosynchronous satellite placement." The pilot of the first Fang lowered the communicator from his ear, and held on to the helicopter for stability. The ground seemed to tremble below his feet as a perfectly concealed platform shook violently, and then lowered them like helpless rodents into a snake’s waiting jaws. As soon as they were cleared, two sliding doors slid smoothly into place above their heads fitting snugly with the surrounding surfaces. Within seconds the airfield looked just as it had. Empty, barren, and lifeless. The elevator continued its rocky descent for a few seconds, then settled into place with a low rumble and crash of metal on metal. Techno-Vipers immediately swarmed the area, combing it for transmitters, bugs, or any other unpleasantness. They then turned their attention to the helicopters, exacting any necessary repairs right then and there. The three pilots stepped down from the platform as another small group of Techno-Vipers stepped onto it and began removing the crates and checking the contents. The chamber was poorly lit, but otherwise appeared a technological marvel. Smooth, metal walls of an underground bunker led towards the central command room with various other hallways and rooms branching off. The training area was the first hallway to the right, which led to an enormous complex underneath the island itself. Small arms fire, martial arts and demolition were the most common classes taught here, although classes in philosophy, sociology and psychology were also prevalent. Cobra Commander had come to the decision that intelligence and skill was just as important as loyalty and sheer numbers and had spent the better part of the past five years building an army of devoted, dangerous, and highly trained operatives. The three men passed the hallway leading to the training area and the next hallway, this time on the left, led down to the basement complex and the prison cells. There had not been many prisoners over the past five years, but when there were it was an unpleasant experience for all concerned. Not only the prisoners, but the surrounding troops as well who had to deal with constant wailing and screams of torture through most of the night. Gulag was the man in charge of the prison floor, and many a soldier cringed at the mere mention of his name. He had been a prison director for the Soviet Union prison camp in Siberia back in the Cold War days, and had lost an eye in a prisoner uprising. That little incident convinced him that his prisoners deserved nothing but contempt, and from that moment on, he came to actually enjoy torture and interrogation. A low echo of air ran through the hallway, carrying with it a distasteful stench that the three pilots did not even want to wonder about. Rotor-Viper One picked up his pace slightly as he neared the last bend in the hallway towards Central Command. His chest bulged out reflexively, a natural result of the pride he felt for a mission accomplished. The Commander would be proud. He smiled underneath the red facemask as he thought to the future, a monument erected in honor of the heroes of the uprising. His name would be there, The Commander had promised. He removed his helmet, revealing a very short buzz of black hair, and he quickly dusted off the fatigues he was wearing. The uniforms had changed slightly, giving up the plain royal blue for a darker blue and black camouflage pattern. The straps still ran down the front, a nine-millimeter attached to one side, a ka-bar knife secured to the other. For this particular mission, the Cobra Sigil was not allowed, but in the future, Trooper Lewis would wear the bright red cobra with pride. He tucked his dark blue helmet under one arm, his face still beaming. The three rounded the corner, and almost stumbled into the most intimidating man many of these troopers had ever seen, perhaps only matched by The Commander himself. He was between the six and seven foot mark, but closer to the latter, and weighed in at a healthy three hundred pounds. He always wore a black beret cocked to one side, and proudly displayed the uniform of a Crimson Guard. The shirt bulged and rippled over his massive frame, but he wore it just the same, more of a symbol than an actual position in the Cobra hierarchy. The silver Cobra symbol on the chest of the shirt was partially torn away and mangled, perhaps to symbolize this man’s facial features. From the right profile, the man looked more than healthy, chiseled even. A strong jaw, dominant features, he was downright handsome. As you scanned around to the other side of his face, things changed drastically. His nose was deformed and almost melted against his face, his left eye set back in its socket, practically surrounded by formed and reformed scar tissue. The skin’s color was a crispy brown, with black twinges, and his face was almost as if sloppily molded from lumpy clay. His left ear was pretty much non-existent, but none of these things affected the man. He was known simply as Snakebite. The head of Cobra Island security and Cobra Commander’s chief bodyguard. As a Crimson Guard, Snakebite had been extremely successful, rising quickly through the ranks to squad leader. He was thought to have been the next Crimson Guard Supreme, completely skipping the rank of Immortal altogether. One evening, however, a GI Joe raid caught the guardsman in a vicious crossfire and the resulting explosion cost him both arms and deeply scarred half of his face. Thinking that his life as a 'Siegie' and his life quite possibly in general, were over, he was eager to hear what Doctor Mindbender proposed as a drastic, new untested project. Snakebite was fused with circuitry from the latest model of Battle Android Trooper, which replaced his arms as well as increased his speed, strength and stamina. Snakebite was now a "Super Soldier". Doctor Mindbender offered to repair the damage done to his face, but Snakebite outright refused, deciding instead to use his features to his advantage, to bring fear to his enemies and gain respect from his peers. It was no doubt a good decision, and Snakebite swiftly became Cobra Commander’s favorite. Now this mountain of a man was staring fiercely into the eyes of the three Rotor-Vipers as they rounded the corner to approach the Command Center. He lifted the twelve-gauge shotgun he always carried with him and grimaced.

"The Commander will see you now," he almost hissed at them, his voice a grating, harsh whisper due to damage sustained in the explosion. It also had a slight metallic twang to it, the voice box enhanced by B.A.T. technology. The Rotor-Vipers nodded and proceeded into the command room, Snakebite following close behind. The Command Center was an extremely large, circular room with computer banks extending throughout almost every inch. Tele-Vipers roamed about in their familiar dark blue uniforms and helmets, each one maintaining constant contact with the others and with the radar screens to verify trickling information. There were more Techno-Vipers present here as well, the purple clad busybodies frantically monitoring all mechanical equipment, checking and double-checking. With little else to be concerned with over the past half decade, Cobra Commander had become a stickler for detail and demanded the same from his followers. A large red throne sat in the center of the room, facing a wall-sized block of monitors and television screens that covered the space just above the entranceway where the Rotor-Vipers now entered. A Crimson Guard Immortal stood stock still on either side of the throne, each carrying an AK-47 assault rifle, and almost seeming to want an excuse just to use it. At the back and sides of the circular room, three more hallways branched out, heading to the motor pool, officer’s quarters, and private meeting room. Troops quarters branched off from the training area from the main hallway and every area past the Command Center were accessed by permission only. The throne in the center of the room was huge and looming, and aptly shaped like the head of a ticked off king cobra. The mouth was bared, showing sharp, deadly fangs, its stone-carved eyes glaring menacingly. The chair itself was a deep, almost blood red, and the man sitting in it glared out from under his hood with a menace that nearly matched the deadly serpent sitting etched in granite above him. He was dressed in deep, royal blue, his arms crossed over his broad chest. A single silver braid ran from over his right shoulder down over the right area of his chest, then back underneath to connect to the other side. A large red Cobra Sigil stared out from behind his arms, just below where the majestic hood rested to a halt. His legs were crossed and shiny black boots tapped impatiently on the cool metal floor. Rotor-Viper One smiled more broadly and quickened his pace yet again.

"Commander! We have returned from the mission most successfully!" The Crimson Guard Immortals glared behind their black faceplates and took cautious steps forward, stopping the eager young pilot in his tracks. There were things that were just understood in the Cobra organization…don’t cross the boss, and when an Immortal says stop, you stop. Rotor-Viper One could almost feel their beady little eyes sizing him up behind the silver visors, probably wondering just how many different ways they could incapacitate him in the shortest amount of time.

"Successfully? Really?" The Commander sneered, leaning forward slightly. He uncrossed his legs and placed his hands on his knees, and stared directly at the pilot, almost through him.

"Yes, Commander. We only lost one man…the other ten were taken care of for us. We let the law do our dirty work for us, after all, we couldn’t have let them live after what they witnessed."

"Ah, yes…one of the disadvantages of using outside help." The Commander leaned back again, and re-crossed his arms. He nodded slightly. "Continue."

"One of the crates was lost unfortunately, but it was not an important one. The parts can be easily replaced. Now that we have the material, we can probably even do it in our own motor pool. All of the equipment for the laboratory was salvaged, so we can go ahead as planned."

"Is that all?"

"We did have an altercation with the local police force, but we escaped successfully, and with little incident, save the lost crate, pilot, and Fang."

"Well, Rotor-One, I thank you for your in depth report. But, you see, I already knew all of that." The Commander leaned forward slightly again, glaring into the soul of Rotor-Viper One.

"Excuse me?" Rotor-Viper One asked nervously. This was not the reception he had anticipated. Cobra Commander looked…upset.

"Everything you just told me…everything in your report. Is *old news*." Cobra Commander stood, a low ember burning in his pupils just behind the swaying hood.

"I…I don’t under—"

"I know you don’t understand, you IDIOT! Everything you just told me is old news. To me, and to the whole damned WORLD! Your whole escapade was broadcast to every NATION ON THE PLANET ON CNN!" The low ember was now a raging inferno as Cobra Commander stepped closer to the Rotor-Viper, their eyes mere inches apart. "Every Fang helicopter, every machine gun burst, every damn ROCKET blowing up a whole damn WAREHOUSE!"

"Commander…I’m sorry…I—"

"Did I give you permission to SPEAK?"

"No…no, sir—"

"We are trying to keep a *low profile*, Rotor-Viper One…hence, the underground base that took us a decade to construct…hence the satellite schedule. The object is to stay hidden from view until our time to strike." Cobra Commander stepped back slightly, regaining his composure. "Tell me something, Rotor-Viper One—"

"Yes, sir?" the pilot asked eagerly, desperately looking for a way to save his skin.

"Can we keep a low profile when our whole mission is on CABLE TV?" this last outburst was shouted so forcefully that the lower half of Cobra Commander’s hood blew up almost over his nose.

"No, sir—"

"No, sir…no, sir…NO, SIR! We most certainly CANNOT! Rotor-Viper One, you’re fired…collect your things from your quarters and find a way to the mainland. See the accountant on the way out to collect your pension."

Rotor-Viper One hung his head slightly. "Yes, sir…I’m sorry, sir." He turned and walked back towards the entrance, brushing quickly by Snakebite and his shotgun.

"Oh, wait just a moment, Rotor-Viper…I forgot something."

Rotor-Viper One halted, but stayed facing away. He couldn’t bear to see the disappointment in his leader’s eyes.

"We don’t have a pension plan."

*BA-DAM!*

The shot rang throughout the Command Center, reverberating off of the metal walls. The surrounding Vipers barely even noticed it, and just continued about their basic duties. The pilot stumbled forward, confused, but did not fall. He spun and saw Snakebite, his shotgun pointed directly at him.

*No! Don’t shoot! Please don’t!* He tried to say but the words would not come. The shotgun trembled slightly as the pilot stumbled forward, pleading and begging for his life. *Please!* His eyes begged Snakebite for lenience. Slick wetness coursed down his back. *I’m sweating…why am I sweating?* He groped back behind himself, pressing his gloved fingers against the damp back of his uniform. *So much sweat…running in rivers down my back.* He stumbled for a couple of more steps, coughing. *Sweat down my pants…collecting…in my boots…so much sweat.* His eyes suddenly became confused, uncertain about what was happening, but then refocused and locked in a desperate, final certainty. *Please, let it be sweat--* Rotor-Viper One dropped to his knees in front of Snakebite, clawing at his chest. He collapsed in a heap on the floor with such a thud that the spent shell casing bounced slightly just next to him. Snakebite lowered the smoking shotgun to the back of Rotor-Viper’s neatly buzzed head.

*BA-DAM!*

Rotor-Viper Two and Four swallowed nervously and approached the Commander.

"Please…it was all One’s plan…we were just following orders!" Four pleaded with his hooded leader while Cobra Commander smiled beneath the cloth.

"I understand…do not worry, your lives will be spared. Snakebite. Take these men to the prison sector. I’m sure Gulag would…love a word with them." Cobra Commander sat back down on his throne, snickering.

"No! Commander, please! Have us shot…anything! Not Gulag!" Rotor-Viper Two actually placed his hands together in prayer as he begged for mercy that was not present.

"The only thing worse than a horrible leader is troopers with no backbone who follow that leader simply on the pretext of following orders." Cobra Commander sneered behind his mask, his eyes narrowing to barely white slits. "You two are no better than that cold meat on the floor. Snakebite, take them away."

The huge man approached them slowly, and the Rotor-Vipers reacted violently. Four charged past him towards the exit, while Two lunged directly at the large mammoth. Snakebite reached out with his empty, metal hand and wrapped it around the back of the collar of Number Four, then yanked fiercely down. Four’s head smacked dully against the metal floor hard enough to leave a round helmet shaped dent in it. The helmet was dented as well, and Four rolled over and did not move. Two struck Snakebite headlong with a rough shoulder tackle, but pretty much bounced off. The large man gripped his shotgun with two hands and drove the butt fiercely into the midsection of the Rotor-Viper, doubling him over. In almost the same fluid motion, the shotgun rose dramatically and violently and caught the pilot directly in the face. There was a low splat, and the trooper slumped unconscious to the floor. Cobra Commander laughed heartily.

"Ah, Snakebite! Quite a showman you are! Are they still breathing?"

Snakebite kneeled to both of them and looked up, nodding.

"Excellent! Take them to Gulag…you two!" he beckoned, motioning to two Vipers, fully equipped with helmet, vests and assault rifles. "Clean up this refuge." He waved a callous hand to One, who was now lying in quite a puddle of his own blood. "That was stimulating!" he shouted happily. Destro emerged from the entryway as Snakebite left, dragging the two men.

"Was that necessary, Commander?" he asked, glancing uncomfortably at the heap on the floor. The Baroness entered just after him, obviously physically disturbed.

"’Wicked men obey for fear, but the good for love.’" Cobra Commander quoted, quite pleased with himself. "Tell me, Destro. Which category do you belong to?"

"Aristotle, Commander? Surely—"

"We came for the planning session, Commander. I believe it is time," it was The Baroness speaking this time, eager to change the subject. She did not want Destro and Cobra Commander at odds again so soon. It jeopardized her position in the Cobra hierarchy. The Baroness was strongly confident in Cobra Commander’s new plans, even though she didn’t yet have all of the details, and knew that if they succeeded, she was guaranteed a good position out of it. That is, if Destro and Cobra Commander could get along. So far, so good, but things were touchy. She followed the men to the meeting room, her mind racing on how to use these occurrences to her own advantage.

Jason Faria leaned back in his recliner in his Washington, D.C. apartment, owned and operated by the U.S. Government. One of the perks of his current employment. Since he was not centralized in a fixed location, he worked for the feds rather than the state. He picked up his grounded phone line and quickly dialed the number by memory.

"Department of Defense, how may I direct your call?" came the brisk reply on the other side of the phone.

"I need a secure line to Blaine Parker please," Faria replied.

"Authorization?"

"Faria, Jason A. Three six nine, oh nine, six five four three."

"Please hold." The phone clicked and the hold music chimed in.

*Yikes,* thought Faria, *This is the U.S. Government…you’d think they’d get something better than Neil Diamond!* The phone clicked again.

"D.O.D., this is Parker." The voice said inquisitively.

"Blaine? This is Jason Faria."

The hesitation gave it away. Parker had no idea who he was talking to.

"Is this a secure line?" Faria asked, just to verify.

"Yes it is," Parker replied, still trying to place the voice.

"Mainframe, old buddy…it’s me, Shockwave." Faria smirked on the other end.

"Shockwave! Damn, pal…you threw me for a loop!"

"Sorry about that…wanted to make sure the line was clear before I started casually throwing out classified information."

"Understood, man, understood. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I’m not sure if this information has trickled your way yet, so I thought I’d drop you a line." Shockwave leaned back in his recliner, and tried to decide where to begin.

"Throw it my way, man…try me."

"To start off with, I’m Team Leader of Mobile S.W.A.T. Team One. Northeast region."

"That’s you? Shoot, man! You’ve got some great numbers tacked up."

"Thanks. Low-Light’s my sniper. Took a hard hit this last op, but he’s doing fine."

"Good to hear. So, tell me more." Mainframe squinted curiously into the receiver. He was pretty sure he knew everything that Shockwave was about to say, but he wanted a clear perspective from someone who was there. Someone who could verify the nasty rumors circulating.

"Well, we had an incident in Hartford, Connecticut yesterday. Masked men unloading weird crates, two cops killed, a real mess."

"I’m listening."

"It was a run of the mill infiltrate and eliminate. Easy stuff, but some weird crap, too. The goons all wore blue fatigues. They were camo patterned, but still blue. They also had black facemasks and blue helmets. Ring a bell?"

Mainframe relaxed a little. If this was all he had, maybe this call wasn’t worth it. "Is that all you’ve got to go on, Shockwave?"

"No way…there’s much more. We spanked one of their transport ‘copters. Single pilot, black and gray color schemes. No emblems, but remarkably similar to the Fang model."

"Terrorists buy half their junk on the black market. Could belong to anyone."

"There’s more. We retrieved a crate from the scene and inspected the contents." Faria leaned forward and put his elbows on his desk for emphasis. Mainframe couldn’t see it of course, but to Faria, it felt better anyway.

"Don’t leave me hanging, J…"

"Sloped armor plating. Jet black, thick metal stuff. Only one vehicle I know that uses that. The markings on the crate just confirmed everything."

"Let me guess…"

"You got it. Military Armament Research System…M.A.R.S."

"Sounds like our boy with the metal head is up and running again."

"Wonder who’s funding him?"

Mainframe’s heart was racing. "Okay, Shock…this is huge. You’ve gotta keep a tight lip about this, okay?"

"You got it, buddy. My lips are sealed. Only guy I’ve even mentioned anything to is Low-Light. He won’t tell a soul."

"Make sure of that, Shockwave. If this is what it appears, we have to tread very carefully."

"Agreed. Just one thing, Blaine. A favor to me and MacBride."

"Name it."

"If things get rolling again?"

"Yeah?"

"We want in."

"I had a feeling you’d say that, Jason. Believe me, if the situation is bad enough so that we’re operational again, we will need all the help we can get."

"I’ve got another guy, too. Seems real solid…we think Cobra whacked his S.W.A.T. Team, I’m sure you’ve heard of him. Frank Kage."

"Yeah. Kage’s rep precedes him. I think we can find a slot for him if we go on this. And that is a huge ‘if’ Shockwave, all right? Military budget’s tight these days, keep that in mind."

"You’ve got my number?"

"I can get it, no problem." Mainframe checked the computer screen on his desk. The moment the call came through all vital information on Jason A. Faria had popped up on his screen.

"Hopefully I’ll be hearing from you."

"Nothing personal, Shock…but I hope I never have to call you…it would mean bad moon rising, that’s for sure." Mainframe clicked the ‘flash’ button and ended the short, but educating conversation. With a flip of his thumb he pressed another number and the phone began ringing on the other end.

"Authorization, please?"

"Parker, Blaine L. RA eight one eight, five zero, one six seven three."

"How may I direct your call?"

"Special Forces…Lieutenant Vincent Falcone."

# CHAPTER FOUR

**A CALL TO ARMS**

Shadows snaked through the corridors, trying to feed on the low watt lamps that were strewn along the walls of the passage in even intervals, each one four feet apart. This time of the morning, the lights were low to let the inhabitants sleep in beds that were inhumanly uncomfortable and rooms that were cold in the winter and sweltering in the summer. Dimming the lights seemed a futile gesture to the man walking with a purpose down that corridor. His sights were set on a non-descript door just down the hall and to the right. It was windowless and had no name on it, but the man knew who was sleeping there. His brown combat boots clunked lowly on the metal flooring, and perhaps despite the elaborate camouflage fatigues he wore, he was plainly visible against the gray, cement walls. Of course, were he in the midst of a foreign jungle among trees, bushes and wild animals, both his attire and training would render him near invisible to all but the most observant person. He was after all, a Green Beret and many would argue that they are more comfortable in the wilderness in a situation they could control, rather than storming down a dank hallway in the early morning hours to wake up a perennially cranky superior officer. This particular Green Beret would rather be under heavy fire and in enemy territory than to have this unenviable task today. He stopped with a jerk next to the door and rapped on it twice. There was no answer, so reluctantly he knocked again. More loudly. No response. He drew in an uncomfortable breath and twisted the knob, marveling in the fact that it was actually unlocked. The room was pitch black, but the man could hear the deep breathing of a body at rest. *Oh, man,* he thought. *He is gonna be pissed.*

"Duke?" he said quietly at first. The body stirred, but did not sit up. "Duke!" he shouted this time at the now mumbling body, who quickly turned over.

"This had better be good, little brother," he groaned.

"No, Duke…it’s me, Falcon. Not your brother."

"Falcon?" he sat up finally, rubbing his eyes. "Sorry, man, I guess I was dreaming."

"No kidding, Top. You were talking in your sleep."

"Damn…"

"I gotta ask you, Duke. What the hell is a ‘golobulus’?"

"Trust me, Falcon…you don’t want to know. What the heck’s going on?"

"I’m not sure yet…something big. The brass wants to meet with us in forty-eight hours."

"You woke me up at friggin’…" he halted a minute to look over at his digital clock. "…three o’clock in the morning for a meeting in forty-eight hours?" he was starting to get agitated.

"Hey, I’m sorry, Top…the note came from on high. The brass wants to meet with us in forty-eight hours as the GI Joe team."

Duke sat bolt upright. "What? Where did you get this message from?"

"Mainframe relayed it to me, but he said it came from someone we didn’t have the ‘need to know’ about. So it’s big."

"We haven’t been formally classified as the GI Joe team in five years. Why now?"

"That’s what I’m hoping we’re going to find out at this meeting. There was more to the message, too."

"What’s that?"

"They want every possible effort made to track down and recruit as many of the old members as possible. They’re building us back up, man."

Duke smiled now. "I knew it was gonna happen sooner or later."

"Anyway, Duke, we’ve already dispatched ten men to start tracking people down. We’ve got our assignments, too. They want you leaving right away."

"Where am I going?"

Falcon pulled out an envelope, and handed it to the Top Sergeant. Duke glanced at Falcon and took it gingerly. "Well, I’m heading, Duke…I’ve got to go to Parris Island and round me up some Jarheads."

Duke nodded as Falcon walked out, and carefully ripped open the envelope. He pulled out an official letter and personnel file. "Oh, man, " he said, almost physically wincing. "Not *him*!" He shook his head as he dropped the information through the paper shredder at his bedside.

"Why me?"

The sky was bright and sunny, the weather already warm, and was just going to get warmer, which was surprising at such a high altitude. The mountains almost glimmered underneath the newly risen sun, a Kodak moment if there ever was one. The dirt road wound through the Sierra Nevada’s almost like a river cutting through dry land. The trees parted like embankments to let the dirt path flow and allow these inhabitants to travel it. This was no fish travelling this path. No fins, no gills, just jungle fatigues and a heaping helping of bad attitude. The green jeep bounced and thumped over the rocky terrain, but held its course with little variation. There were no twenty-millimeter Vulcans sprouting from the back, but it was still a VAMP, and it would take more than a bully dirt road in a western mountain range to deter this vehicle. The driver cursed under his breath as he dipped into what could only be considered a small canyon in the middle of the road. In these parts, it was considered a pothole. The jeep rounded the last corner slowly, but surely, and the man behind the wheel was shocked to see gray smoke spiraling longingly from the brick chimney of the cabin ahead. It reached desperately for the sky, as if making a futile attempt to escape the scalding embrace of the fire below. The smoke dissipated as it reached the bright gray/blue sky of early morning.

"The man was right," the driver said, glancing around at the glowing mountaintops. "Just like molten gold." He stepped down, his boots crunching lightly on the dirt surface of the road. With a quick gesture, he removed his sunglasses from just over his black mustache and stuffed them in the chest pocket of his green and brown tiger stripe camouflage shirt. He took one step before a strong grasp wrapped around his throat and yanked, pulling him off his feet. Stalker wheezed deeply and coughed as the arm tightened, still pulling fiercely. "You, win, pal! You win," Stalker stammered, half-laughing. There was a heavy, breathy chuckle from behind him, sounding almost like a dog chuffing with happiness. Stalker turned as the arm loosened, a smile brightening his brown face.

"Snake Eyes, my man! How are ya, bro?" Stalker stepped forward and wrapped his two large arms around the man who stood before him, who quickly returned the smile and the affection. Snake Eyes did not smile much, but Stalker had a knack for bringing it out in him. Ever since they were in Vietnam on the same Long Range Recon Patrol, Stalker and Snake Eyes were fast friends and close confidants. Yet Stalker always considered himself somewhat of an outsider. Snake Eyes was deep into Japanese culture and ninja intrigue, where Lonzo Wilkinson was simply an Army boy, doing what God and country wanted him to do. Granted, he was damn good at it, but ninja intrigue and silent weapons just plain gave him the willies. "You’re still the only man who can sneak up on a highly trained Army Ranger walking on a dirt road! You’ve gotta tell me how you do it sometime!"

Snake Eyes chuckled again, and pointed to his head.

"Yeah, yeah…it’s all in the smarts, I know."

The silent man smiled and put an arm around his old friend’s shoulder, then guided him towards the cabin.

"The place looks great. Good as new. Don’t think I’ve been up here since those Cobra goons smoked it way back when."

Snake Eyes nodded and continued the walk. The day was early, around six o’clock, and he wore a camouflage boonie cap, as he often did, to keep the sun out of his eyes. The mysterious shadow it cast over his face was an added benefit, and one that he relished, even though he had no reason to hide now. But, then again plastic surgery only softens the physical scars…it does little to aid the healing of mental ones. His familiar blue jacket was draped over his broad shoulders and a black shirt covered his chest. He wore khaki pants, baggy with lots of pockets, and a pair of combat boots most likely inherited from one of his many tours with the military. He had the look of a veteran, yet even in his walk, you could see he still moved like a well-oiled machine. A consummate professional.

"Well, you’re obviously keeping in shape, my man. Silent and damn deadly as always!" Stalker laughed, trying to add a bit of humor to the situation, as he knew that Snake Eyes probably wouldn’t like what he had to say. Army life was rough that way. You often have to do things you don’t like, simply because some old guy in a red white and blue top hat with a long white beard says so. The two men stopped just short of the cabin, which was now a little larger than before, Stalker noticed. Snake Eyes put a calming hand on his friend’s shoulder, and gestured for him to speak.

"Read me like an old book, Snakes. You know I’m not here just to see an old buddy, huh?"

Snake Eyes nodded.

"We need you, pal."

Snake Eyes looked down at the ground. He leaned up against the cabin and crossed his arms, not looking at Stalker.

"Things are hairy, buddy…we’re going to need all the help we can get. The team’s getting rolling again. You’re the first guy they wanted me to find."

Snake Eyes was shaking his head uncomfortably and Stalker didn’t like it.

"C’mon, man. I know you got the honorable discharge…you’re livin’ fat off pension…but I know. I just know you’re aching to get back in action. Back into that old black suit. We need you, buddy. I need you."

"The man’s got obligations, Stalker."

Stalker turned suddenly, his face brightened. She walked from the cabin, as beautiful as the last time Stalker had seen her. She wore a white sweater, tight fitting blue jeans, and her flowing red hair now grew to nearly her waist. She flashed him an honest, but concerned smile as he walked up and hugged her.

"Scarlett. It’s been too long, woman."

"Hi, Stalker. I’m sorry…Snakes is staying here."

"I’m sure the man can make up his own mind, Scarlett. I’m just giving him an opportunity."

"He’s had enough killing and death in his life, Stalker. Both of us have…hell, all three of us have. He’s got a chance to create instead of destroy." Scarlett lowered her gaze slightly and touched Snake Eyes lightly on the arm. "We’ve talked about this possibility many times Stalker. I’m not making decisions for him, merely speaking for him. He just can’t…we can’t. I’m sure you understand—" a low wail interrupted Scarlett in mid-sentence. It emanated from the cabin, a pained, hungry cry. Scarlett turned immediately. "I’ll be right back." She rushed into the cabin, and Stalker smiled.

"You’ve gotta live one there, bud. Hold onto that."

Snake Eyes smiled and nodded. He shot Stalker an apologetic, almost sad look.

"Hey, man…chill. I understand, don’t worry. I know, you’ve got obligations."

As if on cue, Scarlett exited the cabin, a small bundle in her arms. Stalker smiled broadly and walked over.

"And how is my Godson?" he asked happily, fawning over the small infant in the blanket. It was tiny, not yet six months old, and at the moment was very cranky.

"Tommy is doing great," Scarlett said, ever the proud parent. Stalker immediately noticed a thin glisten fall over his friend’s eyes. Stalker wondered if he’d ever get over Storm Shadow’s death. He knew naming his son after him was something that Snake Eyes had to do, but now…four years after. The mere mention of the name, and his old, rock solid buddy seemed to melt just a little inside.

*Please, my brother. Do not seek revenge for my death. My life was consumed by the need for vengeance, and in the end, that need for vengeance took my life. Please, learn from me…use this opportunity to change your path. Do something for the good of man…create, not take away. Live in peace, my brother, for that will be the greatest vengeance you can wreak for me.*

Stalker still remembered those words as if spoken yesterday. Storm Shadow’s dying words to his best friend and ninja clan brother. Suddenly Stalker felt like an ass being here, invading Snake Eyes’ privacy. Trying to recruit him for God’s sake.

"Look, man," Stalker said, extending his hand. "I’m sorry…I was a real grade-A jerk for coming up here to pull you back in. You’ve got your reasons, I know. Take care of your wife and your son, Snakes…you’re going to do real solid for them."

Snake Eyes nodded and smiled then took Stalkers hand. They embraced quickly. Stalker adjusted his beret and turned to the red head.

"Scarlett, Snake Eyes done good by you. You, take care of him and little Tommy, okay? I’m sorry to come up here and ruin a nice morning like this."

"Forget it, Stalker…I worked for those guys, too…I know how…persuasive they can be. And you’re welcome here any time, Lonzo, okay?" She emphasized Stalker’s real name, and he nodded.

"It would be a pleasure, little lady." Stalker stiffened up, snapped off a crisp salute and headed back for the jeep. Snake Eyes returned the salute, then walked back into the cabin, joined by his wife and son.

The meeting room was a somewhat dark place, illuminated by a single lamp hung above the table, which sat eight. The bulk of the mission planning and choreographing took place in the Command Center. This room was for preliminary planning. Discussing the progress of training and recruiting, and making the final decision of when to run with the ball, and when to pass. Each chair was full, with the exception of the one at the head of the long, rectangular table. It was plush, red velvet chair, another stone cobra’s head carefully engraved at the top of the back. The seven men conversed among themselves when the automatic door slid open with a whisper. Two Crimson Guard Immortals halted their progress as Cobra Commander walked into the room, and swiftly lowered himself into the comfortable chair.

"Gentlemen," he said, crossing his arms and smirking behind the blue cloth hood. "I trust you all know why you’re here."

Destro was the first to venture a guess. "You’re finally going to reveal the specifics of our plan, Commander?"

"Soon, my friend…very soon. You know all you need to know for the moment. Have patience, Destro. We have other matters to discuss today. Despite the Hartford, Connecticut debacle things appear to still be running smoothly. We have remained unnoticed, thanks to Destro’s interception of all of the United States’ global satellite relay codes. How long have you been receiving that information, Destro?"

"Three years, Commander."

"Someday you will have to tell me how you do it."

"Some day." Destro’s face was an impatient grimace behind the silver steel mask. *When is this plan going to get rolling? We waste time with these frivolous meetings! All to inflate that buffoon’s ego!* Destro hid his thoughts well, placing his black gloved hands on the table in a relaxed fashion.

"So, Destro…how are your trainees faring?" Cobra Commander leaned in just a little.

"Well, they have grown very comfortable with the assault weapons, especially the AK-47’s and Uzi submachine guns. Their accuracy has improved eight percent over the past week."

"Good," The Commander said plainly and turned his attention elsewhere. "Zartan? How is it coming in the unarmed combat and undercover tactics department?"

"They’re eager to learn, Commander," Zartan replied, his strong voice echoing in the small room. "They have a decent grasp of hand to hand fighting styles, but more improvement is needed. Especially in the undercover tactics."

The Commander nodded. "Scrap Iron?"

"Explosives and detonation training is proceeding well. RPG and LAW skills do need some work, though."

"That all sounds good. Continue the training at a furious pace, gentlemen. The time is quickly approaching, and our men must be prepared."

"We have been making amazing strides in the Shadow Project, Commander," Doctor Mindbender chimed in. He grinned widely under his thick mustache, and his cybernetic optical attachment glimmered slightly.

"Really, Doctor? That is good news. Keep it up. We will need the Shadow Project to be in full force when the time to strike arrives. It will be vital to island security."

"Cobra Commander," the voice had a slight British twinge to it, proper yet eerily sinister at the same time.

"Yes, Overlord?" Cobra Commander replied, cringing on the inside over the ridiculous and power-drunk nickname the man had given himself.

"I would be remiss if I didn’t express at least some displeasure over this apparent ‘strike’ you keep referring to." Overlord squinted behind his monocle and ran a hand quickly through his slick, black hair.

"Well, Overlord…this is something that we have been preparing for nearly half a decade now. Any problems you have with the plan will just have to be overlooked."

"My dear Cobra Commander," Overlord began, standing from his chair. You could almost feel the tension in the air thicken as he approached the tall, red chair. "Without funding from my oil company, this little ‘project’ of yours would be nothing more than crazy jottings on a cocktail napkin. I am not comfortable with my company being linked to Cobra if you plan something detrimental to global security."

Cobra Commander surprisingly remained seated. He glanced upwards at Overlord’s gold mask wrapped over his mouth and around his head. His bare arms were crossed over his red-shirted torso, and his uncovered eye glared menacingly down at him. "Sit down, Overlord. You are allowed in these meetings because, quite frankly, you have a great tactical mind. Your time in the British Special Air Service has served you well, and will serve Cobra well. If you do not like what Cobra is doing, then you may leave."

"I will not see such a large investment go down the chute! You promised to increase my initial deposit a hundred fold, and I do not see how this ludicrous ‘plan’ you’re so secretive about is going to do that!"

"In your heart, Overlord, you are a bad, bad man. I have seen that first hand. Trust me. When you learn of the specifics of the plan, you will be impressed. You will go along with it for the sheer sake of ev—"

"I beg to differ, Commander!" Overlord was enraged. His face had grown beet-red and his brow furrowed deep crevasses into his flesh. He hand pounded the table in front of Cobra Commander, the slam reverberating loudly in the enclosed area. His face was pointed down, mere inches from the side of Cobra Commander’s head. He breathed haggardly, as if he had been holding in this displeasure and rage for too long, and had finally popped the cork.

"All right, Overlord." Cobra Commander spoke with a calm and even tone. "You are right. Without your investment, Cobra might have never pulled itself back together. For that, I owe you a debt of gratitude." He finally stood, pushing the chair back gently, and looked Overlord in the eye. "But you see, the money has come…it has been spent. Cobra has grown back close to its original strength." The Commander walked past Overlord, cradling one arm in the other. As he made his points he flashed an index finger in the air as if checking off each one as he thought of it. "So you could say, Overlord, that your usefulness has ended."

Overlord was taken aback. "What? You said your—"

"We have the money. We spent the money. We don’t need you anymore." He was walking a circle around Overlord, his eyes burrowing deep into him the whole time. "But, you do have a remarkable tactical mind. One that we could put to use. We need your mind, Overlord. We need everyone to be in synch for this plan to work, and for this plan, as much as I hate to admit it, we do need you."

Overlord smirked smugly and began to talk. Cobra Commander cut him off.

"But let me put this in terms you can understand." He stopped walking in front of Overlord, and stood still in front of him. "If you persist in interrupting me, undermining my authority, and generally railroading me every chance you get, make no mistake about it--" He took a step closer, his breath now puffing the bottom of his hood out ever so slightly. "--I will not hesitate to put a nine-millimeter bullet directly into YOUR BRAIN!" He screamed the last two words in a shocking, violent outburst, his voice almost cracking with pure rage.

Overlord stepped back awkwardly, staring at the madman in the cloth hood standing just before him. Cobra Commander’s eyes were bulging in his eyeholes, the small veins tinged a deep red. A thin trickle of sweat snaked down his forehead and disappeared.

"Are we clear on this matter?" His voice had returned to normal, and he turned to return to his seat.

"Yes, Commander," Overlord quickly replied. "I will aid in any way I can."

"I thought you would see it my way."

Destro exhaled a sigh of relief, honestly worried that the confrontation was going to end in bloodshed. He turned to The Baroness who sat next to him, and whispered in her ear.

"Something you can share with the rest of the class?" Cobra Commander asked.

"I was just discussing how our men seemed to be pretty much in shape, and was wondering if you wanted to know how our weapons and vehicles are shaping up?" Destro was eager to change the subject.

"Well…I guess now that we have that…unpleasantness behind us, perhaps we should discuss our armored division. Please, lead the discussion."

"Well, we are right on track according to schedule. We have three quarters of the H.I.S.S. Tanks operational, and they have all passed their initial diagnostic tests. The latest shipment should take care of the remaining tanks, with only a little improvisation needed for the missing crate. The Stingers are all complete and operational, every third one equipped with an Asp gun-pod. The Moray Hydrofoils are ninety percent completed and the Lampreys and Eels are finishing up diagnostics on all of those. Those are the bulk of our ground forces, although we do have lots of other smaller means of defense that are also proceeding as planned."

"What about our air force?" Cobra Commander was now focused on the task at hand, and seemed pretty close to fully calmed down from the altercation.

"For that, I turn you over to Wild Weasel," Destro gestured at the eighth man sitting at the table and Wild Weasel eagerly took the floor. He wore his bright red helmet and flight suit, mostly for security reasons at this point. Cobra employed him, but normally worked freelance for mercenary groups throughout the world, and maintained as much anonymity as possible.

"The Rattlers are all done and ready to go. For obvious reasons, we haven’t been able to fly any practice missions, but each Aero-Viper has clocked in thousands of hours in our Rattler simulator. We are ready for launch at a moment’s notice. The Fangs are working as well, as we already know. The Claws, jet packs and few Night Ravens are incidental at this point, but will be ready to roll by mission time."

"Excellent. Gentlemen, this meeting is adjourned…set your clocks. It is now seven days and counting until Cobra changes the face of the world again." He stood and stepped to the door, let it slide open and swooped out, his hood flowing out slightly behind him.

"Easy, Clutch! We may be in Florida, but this isn’t Daytona!" Duke clutched the armrest as the convertible whipped around the corner, barely even slowing.

"Sorry, Duke," Clutch said in his thick Jersey accent. "I see the ocean, and I just get a lead foot, man!" Clutch glanced past Duke, out into the open air beyond. They were on a winding road, stretching along the east coast of Florida, the Atlantic Ocean in plain view over the rocky edge of the cliff they were driving on. It was close to noon, and the sun was bright and circular over the rippling blue/green water, with hardly a cloud in the sky.

"Are we almost there?" he asked, probably for the third time in an hour. They had flown from Dulles to Atlanta, then picked up a rental car, and immediately proceeded south.

"We’d get there a heck of a lot sooner if you quit gripin’ when I reached sixty!" Clutch laughed heartily and rubbed the scruff on his face. Duke couldn’t help but smile, although his mood was not good on this sunny day.

Even with the sun beating feverishly down on the metal trailer, it was dark and dank inside. The blinds were all drawn tight, the air conditioner chugged night and day, and the air was thick and moist. The trailer was not big, but it was a fine size for the occupant who never had company. The living room took up the most space, a six-foot couch pressed up against the rear wall facing an entertainment center with a small television fit into it. There was a clear glass coffee table just in front of the couch littered with empty glasses and a full ashtray. A bottle of Jack Daniels was tipped over, but the contents remained unspilled, for the simple reason that there were no contents. Beer bottles littered the plush carpet floor like toys in a spoiled child’s bedroom and the air was permeated with alcohol and stale cigarette smoke. No pictures adorned the wall, although there were a few photographs in frames scattered here and there. If the living room were considered a disaster area, then the kitchen would have been condemned long, long ago. Piles of dirty dishes led from kitchen to stove, to refrigerator and back again, all on tacky stucco shelves and above a filthy, unmopped floor. More beer bottles and various alcoholic containers were plastered about in the kitchen. Enough empties to keep a man drunk for a week, yet these empties had only generated over the weekend. Even at after twelve noon, all lights were out, the outside world closed off by the blinds, the walls, and the mind. Voices grumbled over the television set, which was still on, and on the tattered, worn couch a body stirred. He rolled over slowly, uncomfortably, his black hair tussled and unkempt. He shot a disapproving look at the TV and groped along the floor, searching for the remote. His hand brushed over a photo in a frame that had fallen to the floor the night before, as this particular photo often did. This picture drove him to drink pretty much every night, and he could not think far enough ahead to be able to tell when he wouldn’t pass out instead of going to sleep. It was a daily occurrence, a nightly occurrence, something he did more often than bathing, which was every bit as repulsive as it sounds. He lifted the photo in the frame, and squinted at it through pained eyes. His eyes were puffy, red and bloodshot, from crying or the drinking, he had no idea which. They blended together now and he had no desire to try and separate the two. He sniffled and reached for the bottle of Jack Daniels, and tipped it up. When nothing came out he shouted an obscenity and threw it angrily towards the kitchen. It hit the counter and bounced, then rolled harmlessly to rest in the carpet among its Budweiser cousins. He flopped his head back onto the couch and let the photo drop, relaxing somewhat now that it was out of his sight. Just barely, through the wall and out in the world, he thought he heard tires scrape across the dirt road that led to his home, on the edge of the ocean. Muffled voices rattled on, growing closer to the door to his trailer. The man sat up, running his hand through his thick dark hair and stared at the door, almost trying to will the unwelcome visitors away from his house. The voices had stopped, but he could tell there was a man standing at his door. The shadows hovered in the small space between the bottom of the door and the living room floor.

*Knock Knock*

The man remained seated, unsure of his next course of action. For right now, it was sitting and trying to focus his eyes through a hung-over haze. The shadows moved slightly, and he thought he saw the shadow of a head trying to peek through the window.

*They’ve found me! They’re coming for me!* His mind raced, still quite fogged from the large dose of alcohol swimming in the bloodstream.

*Knock Knock*

He remained seated, trying not to move, even the slightest bit.

"C’mon!" The muffled voice echoed from beyond the door. "Your car’s in the driveway! We know you’re here, man!"

He moved slightly, turning his ear. Did he know that voice?

"Answer the door! We just want to talk. It’s hot as hell out here," the voice reiterated.

He stood shakily, his legs threatening to wobble right out from under him. He walked slowly to the door, blissfully unaware that he was dressed only in a white tee shirt and flannel boxers. He gingerly stepped through the minefield of bottles until he was at the door.

"C’mon, buddy," the voice urged, apparently aware that someone was now at the door. He closed his fist around the knob, his heart racing. He inhaled deeply and twisted the knob, pulling the door open. The sunlight almost hit him like a fist as he immediately shut his eyes in a futile attempt to try and avoid a nasty headache. He squinted his eyes open little by little until the blond, buzz cut head filled his vision.

"Hi, Duke," he mumbled, desperately fighting off the sunlight with one hand over his eyes.

Duke felt like he stared at him forever, just trying to say hi. Gone were the boyishly good looks. Only, grim hard reality. Gone was the always-present cocky grin. Just a tight-lipped frown through pursed lips. He hardly recognized him.

"Hi, Flint. Long time no see. Can I come in?"

"No."

"C’mon, Flint…I just want to talk with you."

"The place is a pig sty. Can’t afford a cleaning lady." He chuckled a little at his own joke.

"Well, I can’t talk to you out here with you in your underwear, man. Come on. We’re all friends here."

"Fine, Duke," Flint mumbled, turning and walking back into his house. "What do you want, Duke? Gonna draft me?" he chuckled again, and half expected Duke to laugh as well. He didn’t.

"Love what you’ve done to the place," Duke said, looking around.

"Not many options. Don’t give you a pension for a dishonorable discharge." The words were spit like venom from thin lips.

"Flint, I’m not here to discuss the past."

"Funny, I don’t see much of a future here."

"We want to give you a second chance."

"You asking me to re-up?" Flint was sitting on the couch now and stared a hole in the Top Sergeant who was seated in a Lazy-Boy a few feet away.

"Yeah. All past issues forgotten. Clean slate."

"For them, maybe, not for me."

"For God’s sake, Dash! You pulled a gun on a Brigadier General! What did you want them to do?"

"At least I didn’t pull the trigger." He chuckled again.

"Is this some damn joke to you?" Duke shouted, standing. "I think I’m wasting my time. Lady-Jaye would be damn disappointed if she saw you right now."

Flint stood bolt upright. "Don’t talk about her, Duke! You have no right!"

"You’re acting like an asshole, Flint! You know it. I’m giving you a second chance…and you’re pissing it away. What do you think Lady-Jaye would want you to do?"

Flint buckled, just a little, his emotions almost getting the best of him. "Just leave, okay?" he dropped back onto the couch. His head hung low. Duke felt a little guilty. He approached him slowly, and placed a consoling hand on his friend’s shoulder.

"Just think about it, okay? Don’t ruin your life."

"Duke, please."

"All right. But Lady-Jaye would want you to go on. Just because her life’s over, doesn’t mean yours is, t—"

"Allison."

"Excuse me?" Duke asked, kneeling down beside his former friend.

"Damn it, Duke…her name was Allison." Tears brimmed to the corners of Flint’s eyes, and he buried his head in his hands.

"I’m sorry, Flint." Duke stood, patting Flint softly on the shoulder. "You know where to reach me if you change your mind."

Flint didn’t reply. His shoulders shook with the force of his tears. Duke shook his head and stepped back out into the sun light, then eased the door shut behind him.

"No go, huh, Top?" Clutch asked as Duke dropped into the passenger’s seat. Duke shook his head no, and Clutch took the hint to shut up and drive. The convertible kicked up pebbles as it spun out onto the black top and drove down the road, the two passengers unaware that a face was peeking out at them from behind the blinds. Two puffy red eyes, following the car as it wound up the road back to Atlanta.

# CHAPTER FIVE

**CHANGE IN THE AIR**

Fog had settled in thick and chunky just at tree level, blocking out most of the plump, white moon. The air was chilled tonight, a fleeting breeze coming in off of the ocean and tearing through the dank swamps on the island. The only part of the island which still supported life was this small section of land, relentlessly battered by crashing waves and brutal weather until it gave up its defiance and grew into a mushy, wet mass of swampland. There was life here, but humans had introduced it, a one-time Cobra employee by the name of Croc Master. He guarded the sanctuary of Cobra Island with an army of trained crocodiles, many of which continued to habit this part of the island, even long after their master had disappeared, supposedly buried in the freighter alongside so many of his peers. Before that fateful day, Croc Master, who cared so deeply for his beasts, had imported many breeds of wild animal, from boars and rabbits to snakes and frogs. Now that Croc Master was gone, his ‘children’ still had plenty to survive on. Cobra men knew to stay away from this part of the island, this section of swampland. It was only about four square miles, but once inside, you may have well been in a different world. It was hypothesized that perhaps Croc Master even helped transform this area to swampland somehow, hoping to make it more inviting for him and his reptile family. The trees were dense and moss covered, much of the area was knee-deep mud and murky green water. The ground that wasn’t was a marsh-like, soft and grassy area, with brown liquid seeping up in various locations. This part of the island seemed so different from the other parts that it’s hard to believe that it could exist naturally, but in defiance of all laws of nature, there it was. The grass rustled above a section of mushy, but relatively solid ground, a green streak weaving back and forth just below the tan weeds. The large reptile thrashed his tail back and forth as he shot forward through the grass with remarkable speed for such a large beast. Mud sank below his massive feet, his sharp claws gripping and tearing into the swampland, using them for traction as well as propulsion. This crocodile was on the hunt. Thirty feet ahead, in a small clearing (there were no large clearings in this particular swamp) a wild boar stood proudly, its two piglets hovering just behind. Two piercing, almost luminescent eyes stared out form the grass as the reptile continued his progress, although now that the prey was in sight, it had slowed considerably, trying to judge the best time to strike. The green beast was now wading in water up to its torso, but still made no noise, and was nearly invisible under the low cover of the grassland. With a snort the boar turned its head to the left, keeping watch while the young ones fed on grass just behind it. Swishing through the shallow water, the crocodile was now even more invisible and picked up his speed just slightly, rushing in for the kill. The boar seemed to sense the predator and snorted loudly to its children, chasing them deep into the wet forest. Another, louder snort echoed in the cool air as the large mammal hunkered down to defend his territory. Its back hooves dug into the more solid mud, just by the edge of the marsh, and its head lowered, threatening whatever was approaching. It grunted and dug little trenches in the muck with its tusks, the eyes now locked with the crocodiles’. It prowled closer, foot by foot, it’s long, solid body slipping from the water, and dragging along the mush. His eyes bore deep into the boars’, his wide mouth opening slightly. A string of saliva slowly drooled from one of his fangs, and his muscles tensed, ready to strike. He leaped quickly and snarled, the noise just barely covering an almost silent whisper in the night air. The whisper turned into a high pitched whine, a silver streak cutting through the brush and the trees. The streak pounded viciously into the reptile, just behind its head, where the head met the back. It struck with a deep, metallic *THUNK* and the beast halted suddenly, its mouth wide, and its eyes opened in surprise. He whipped his huge head around in a furious rage, a guttural shriek and growl. Spit and blood shot from the creature’s mouth in a wide arc as he thrashed wildly, snarling. In mid thrash, quite suddenly, a large figure bounded from the cover of trees and struck the beast full in the chest, knocking it back with the force of the blow. The two hit the soft earth and somersaulted clumsily, the mysterious figure almost miraculously landed on his feet, straddling the croc’s back, his large arms wrapped tightly around the monster’s throat and mouth. With a roar, the descendant of the dinosaurs threw himself into the air and shot to one side, trying to free himself from the unknown attacker. The man was pulled off of his feet and swung through the air like a rag doll with half its stuffing. Amazingly, the man hung on, perhaps more out of desperation than desire. Another growl blew from the pursed lips of the croc as it halted and crashed down in the other direction, falling onto the man with almost all of its weight. The figure exhaled violently, his breath shooting out in a fast blast of air, and he let go of the reptile, then rolled to the ground and landed on his back. The beast landed on his feet and faced the attacker head on; it’s teeth were now flaked with red, but still looked menacing and more than deadly. The man bolted quickly upright, jumping almost immediately from his back to his feet in one motion. A snarl indicated attack by the crocodile and it shot forward with lightning speed. The man grunted, and incredibly darted out of the way, quickly leaping to the back of the crocodile and again resuming his iron grip on the monster’s massive neck. The croc screamed with frustration and anger, but his strength was quickly fading from a pulsing flow of blood streaming from the wound where a silver, metal arrow was embedded in the back of the head. Every exertion, every gesture pumped more dark red liquid from the deep puncture wound. The man straddled the reptile again, this time planting his feet firmly in the mud on each side of him. With a huff, the beats thrashed again, but the large form on top of it maintained control, squeezing tightly around the throat. You could almost see the life ebbing from the huge creature, its struggling fading, squeeze by squeeze. Finally the monster was still, and the man, a decent sized one himself, pulled violently upward while continuing to squeeze. The short *POP* reverberated among the trees and the croc thrashed once more than lay still, just a green log resting in the grass. With a triumphant shout, the man let the croc’s motionless head drop to the ground, his breath pounding in strong, uneven bursts. The creature’s blood covered the man, so much so that a bystander would have thought him the loser of the life and death battle. Red dripped from his clenched fists, ran down his chest, and collected in coagulating puddles at his feet, making a sickly brown/red mixture in the wet mud. The man’s pupiless eyes shone like squinting beacons in the night, his teeth bared and his mouth open. Once again, Zartan ruled the night on Cobra Island.

"Gor, Zartan! We din’t know yeh could do all that!" a thick accented voice screeched from the trees.

"Sometimes, Ripper…" Zartan had to stop to catch his breath, "…I don’t even know what I’m capable of myself." He stepped over the dead beast and walked to the woods where Ripper, Torch, Buzzer and Zanzibar stood. "That was the purpose of this little exercise. To see exactly what I am capable of."

"But, Zartan…wut do yeh mean?" Torch asked this time, stepping a little closer, walking gingerly to avoid any other possible creatures hiding among the bushes.

"Over the past years, I’ve come to think…" the mysterious, cowled man turned and looked into the forest. "…That perhaps I’m not quite…human."

The Dreadnoks stared aimlessly. "Don’ be ridiculous, Zartan! Yer just as human as us three."

Zartan turned and looked, staring dubiously at the four men in front of him. He looked down, and wiped a swath of blood from his clear chest plate. "Somehow, I find little comfort in that, Torch."

Buzzer leaned down and tapped Zartan’s chest curiously. "Say, Mate…that bloody monster din’t bust up any of yer holo-whatziz, did he? Yeh know…those thing that make you change appearances?"

Zartan walked past The Dreadnoks, back into the cover of trees. The four followed him eagerly. "Well, Buzzer, that’s one of these issues I’m coming up with. Lately…I don’t need the suit to change."

"Wut?" Buzzer said suddenly, and stopped abruptly. "Wut are yeh saying, Zartan?"

"I think I am something…more than human. I was born that way, it just took a while for the evidence to show itself. But I’ve been feeling it lately. I’m faster, have quicker reflexes…and I’m a lot stronger."

"I don’ unnerstand, Zartan! What’re yeh talkin about?" Torch stopped as well, scratching his head.

"Perhaps I should just show you." Zartan walked to another small clearing and closed his eyes. His body tensed, his fists clenched, and his body began to tremble and shake fiercely. Sweat poured in sticky streams down his furrowed brow and over his tightened face. He dropped suddenly to all fours, and his skin began to bubble and ripple inhumanly. The Dreadnoks stared with gaping jaws. Zartan’s body twisted and popped, formed and reformed right there before their eyes. Within seconds, the transformation was complete. A crocodile stood before them, almost a mirror image of the one Zartan had just killed only a lot smaller. The creature looked to be in intense pain, shuddered violently, then began popping and twisting again. Seconds later, Zartan stood again, still fully dressed and breathing very heavily. A steady stream of his own blood trickling from his nose and lips now joined the blood on his chest and legs.

"Bloody hell, Zartan! What th’ hell whuzzat?" Ripper stood aghast.

"I told you…I appear to be more than human."

"Yer a flippin’ crocodile?" Torch was now the shocked one.

"No, you moron!" Zartan shouted impatiently. "I can now ‘become’ whatever I so choose. The reforming of my basic skeletal structure makes it very…painful. Something I cannot do very often or for very long. But I’m hoping I can condition my body to handle it better."

The Dreadnoks finally appeared to understand, each one nodding his head slowly.

"The only problem so far is that I can only become something of the same basic size as myself. I cannot add or reduce mass from my body."

The Dreadnoks all regained their vacant stares, except for Buzzer, who appeared to at least understand what words Zartan was using.

"Never mind," Zartan growled, exasperated and exhausted. "Come on, Dreadnoks. We’d better get back underground. If Cobra Commander catches up above ground, there will be trouble.

"Gor, as bad ass as yeh are, Zartan, an’ yer still scared of ole rag face?" Ripper asked, laughing.

"The only thing I’m scared of, you idiot, is an empty bank account! Now, come on!" The five men walked into the woods, towards the shaft, which led underground.

"So, Zartan, does it hurt that much to become anotha person?" Buzzer asked.

"Of course not…my skeleton maintains its shape in human form. That is no problem. Now, shut up with the questions before I regret telling you all about this!" The men vanished behind the trees and were suddenly gone.

Falcon’s boots clanked noisily on the metal floor, the light bangs echoing throughout the enclosed, metal hallway. This hall was remarkable similar to the one he had traveled through about 36 hours ago. The phone call had awoken him from a sound sleep, but the office had said it was urgent and required his immediate attention. With what Falcon knew about what was going on in the world, he was sure that this was not a meeting he should be late for. He stopped in front of the plain, metal door, no signs, no plaques, nothing proclaiming what was inside. That made sense, really. Anyone who was this deep into the Pentagon, and had the proper credentials to get this far should know damn well where he was going and what door led to where. Falcon pulled out his magnetic security card, making sure his thumbprint was firmly pressed on the light blue square. The security card first had to verify his thumbprint, then be swiped through a reader, then Falcon had to input his top-secret serial number. Security was completely ridiculous at this level, considering a very scant amount of the population of a very small town even knew this place existed. But nonetheless, Falcon proceeded through the cumbersome procedure, and within seconds, he was inside. There was a large round table in the middle of the meeting room, a digital map of the world flickering on it. With mere pushes of a button, the table could be turned into a digital monitor to zoom in on any spot on the globe, and could then project actual video as it was taken from a satellite. That way, the men overseeing the mission could just sit at the table and observe, taking notes and initiating command where needed. It was quite ingenious. A marvel of modern technology. Twelve men sat around the large table, and it looked like Falcon was the last to arrive. Two of the men he did not recognize, apparently men from ‘The Agency’ who were overlooking the meeting to make sure everything was kosher. The only problem was, no one was making sure they were kosher. If ‘The Agency’ was involved, that meant The Jugglers were involved, and that little issue bothered Falcon to no end. He hoped by the time this was over, The Joes would be a self-sustained unit again with no need for suits and ties that would criticizing every move. But Falcon also knew that this reunion of the GI Joe team was also supposedly temporary, just to eliminate this new threat, and if they did take out Cobra, then things would be right back to normal. Falcon took his seat and took a quick inventory of the people sitting around the table. At the head of the table was Duke, Top Sergeant and current Field Commander of the team. To his left was Stalker, the infiltration specialist, Army Ranger, general bad ass and second in command. Falcon figured he ranked higher than a lot of people sitting around the table, but in GI Joe, rank was a minor factor. It was a factor, but experience counted for a lot. Next it was Roadblock, the heavy machine gunner and master chef of the team, then was Mainframe. He was the Intelligence Officer and Technology Expert, the link to the brass in Washington, and the computer hacker extraordinaire. Just to Falcon’s left was Clutch, the transport to and from the missions, Ripcord was after him. Ripcord was the master jumper, and Special Forces snake eater. Snake eater was a term used to describe the baddest of the bad…guys that would camp out in the woods, eating snakes if they had to survive, waiting for the perfect opportunity to sneak into enemy camp and smoke it. That term had now been curbed a little bit to specify a Joe team member, meaning that they ate Cobras for breakfast. He was the man who was the first one in and last one out, and that was a good thing, because you really didn’t want to see what he did when he got in there. Dial Tone was in the chair next to Ripcord, the squad’s communications officer and link to the outside world. Chuckles sat next, mostly a behind the scenes guy, but a very important guy to have on the team…he got more accomplished with a pen than lots of soldiers did with firearms. Finally, rounding out the table was Lifeline, the avowed pacifist and medic for the team. He didn’t fire a weapon, but his skills under the line of fire were legendary. The two men in suits and sunglasses did not give their names they just hung around in the corner, looking on. Falcon fidgeted nervously in his seat as the meeting began. Mainframe was the first to speak.

"All right, boys…Washington wants to know what our status is? We need a general idea of force strength to know what we have to work with here."

"I guess I’ll start," Duke said, sighing. "Flint was a major no-go. I think we’d just better write him off. Even if he agreed, I’m not sure he could hack it anymore. I do have some good news, though. I contacted Admiral Keel Haul, and he connected me with Cutter and Topside, and they’re both eager to come aboard. That’s about it for me."

"Okay…guess I’ll throw in my two cents." Stalker glanced over to Mainframe, who had his laptop computer set up and was typing furiously. "Snake Eyes has prior responsibilities," the whole room seemed to sigh at once. "But, I did get a hold of some of my Ranger buddies who set me up with Beachhead, Airborne, Repeater and Recoil. Recoil is neck deep in the Middle East on some top-secret classified run n’ gun, but Beachhead, Airborne and Repeater are all psyched to join up. They’ll be here for the meeting tomorrow."

"Great. Good start so far," said Mainframe. Duke shot him a sideways glance as if to say *Hey! Who’s in charge here, anyhow? Me or the suits?* But he kept his mouth shut. "Roadblock? How about you?" Mainframe’s fingers danced rhythmically against the contoured keyboard.

"Well, my luck wasn’t so hot, m’man. I tried to grab Rock & Roll and Tripwire, and after finally tracking down their whereabouts, I found out that R & R is on some damn surfin’ safari in Hawaii and Tripwire, he’s teaching engineering at West Point. He can’t just ditch that quite yet. No luck here."

"All right…well, I had quite a bit of luck, actually. I’d already spoken to Shockwave and Low-Light, and they’re shoe-ins…they’ve also got a new recruit with them, now going by the name Kevlar. We don’t have time for training for him, but take my word…he doesn’t need it. I was also able to pull some strings to get us some pilots…Wild Bill, Lift Ticket and Ace as of right now just got transferred to our team. I was also able to track down Outback and Muskrat, who will also be at the meeting tomorrow. I’ll tell you guys, D.O.D. has its privileges…you don’t know what you’re missing." Grumbles form around the table change Mainframe’s mood a little. "All right, Falcon," he said quickly, almost just to divert attention. "Your turn."

"My trip to Parris Island worked out very well," Falcon said, happy to have some positive news. "Gung Ho and Leatherneck will be at the meeting tomorrow. They were both instructors there, but both had plenty of leave time coming up, and got the okay to transfer. Unfortunately I struck out on Mutt, Grand Slam and Ambush. Couldn’t even locate them."

"Guess it’s my turn," Clutch said. "Well, I was out with Duke the whole time, so I didn’t do squat! Chauffeur doesn’t get me too many leads these days." He said it with a smile and the whole table chuckled along quietly.

"Ripcord?" Mainframe asked. He looked at the dirty blonde hared, boyishly good-looking paratrooper. His fingers continued their bizarre ballet on the keyboard.

"Well, my Special Forces contacts worked out okay. Torpedo, Recondo, Bullhorn and Wet Suit were on some pretty hairy need-to-know only type stuff. Caught the first three and they’ll be here, but missed Wet Suit."

"Don’t worry about Wet Suit…I’ll fill you guys in later on that. Dial Tone?" Mainframe smirked smugly at the knowledge that he knew something they didn’t.

"Well, I got a hold of Alpine and Bazooka. Alpine was setting up to go on a trek up Kilimanjaro, but he thought this sounded like more fun. Bazooka was working in instructor’s capacity, teaching about explosives and propelled grenades. They’ll both be here tomorrow."

Chuckles leaned back in his chair a little, his garishly colored shirt flowing around his slim waist. He still wore the .45 tucked into his shoulder holster, a slight bulge underneath the flowered shirt. "You can expect Law here tomorrow, but he was the only guy I could get in touch with."

All right…that brings us to Lifeline. Any luck, buddy?" Mainframe asked.

"No, sorry. I reached Stretcher, but he’s working at Bethesda Naval Hospital. Making good money. I couldn’t talk him into it."

Mainframes nodded and tapped a few more keys on his computer, then pounded enter hard, just for effect. "Well, including us, we’ve got thirty-one. Not a bad squad at all. I think the brass should be happy with these results. We have at least one more person coming tomorrow, and possibly a couple others, depending on how my leads pan out, so we should be at about thirty-five strong. Not our strongest, but hopefully good enough. Does everyone know when and where the meeting is tomorrow?"

"Staten Island, right? Chaplain’s Assistants Motor Pool?" Duke said, matter of factly.

"Exactly. We arranged for the assistants to be on a little field trip for the next few days, so we’re going in there low key so we can plan and prepare. We figured that would be a good place that everyone should remember how to get to." Mainframe leaned back and looked around. "Any questions?"

"Yeah." Duke spoke up eagerly. "Tell us you didn’t wake us at this early hour simply to go over our roster."

Mainframe’s smile thinned a little bit. "O..of course not. There is one more thing we have to go over, I was just getting this out of the way first."

"All right. Let’s hear it." Duke leaned on the table, glancing sideways towards the two suits who were still statues in the corner.

"Well, based on this new information, we thought it prudent to act on this in some manner right away. Just to rule out some improbabilities."

Mainframe tapped his keys a little more, and pulled up a mission briefing. "At 0300 hours this morning, a Navy SEAL scout team will be hitting ashore to verify what our satellites have been telling us is true."

"Hitting ashore? Where?" Duke looked hard at Mainframe, who fidgeted in his seat.

"According to all of our satellite data, this area of the ocean is unoccupied space. We just thought it prudent to verify that with a more hands on approach."

Duke stood, his hands slamming on the table. "Where did you send them, Mainframe?" He leaned close, glaring at the nervous man in the gray suit.

"This is the best SEAL team we’ve got. As a matter of fact, a couple of your buddies are heading the mission. Wet Suit and Tracker are leading a team of five others to infiltrate and investigate."

"Tell me you didn’t send them to Cobra Island!" Duke shouted now, a foot in front of Mainframe’s face.

"The place is deserted, Duke, there’s nothing there!"

"Tell me!"

"Yeah, Duke…Cobra Island. They’ll be hitting ashore in about two hours. The C-130 is probably over the Gulf of Mexico already."

Duke turned away, sputtering. "You unbelievably stupid bastards!" he now screamed at the two men in suits.

"Duke, if you want to resign leadership of this team, you’re off to a wonderful start!" Mainframe was now on his feet, showing a little backbone.

"If Cobra is there, you’ve just sent seven men to their graves!"

"But Cobra isn’t there. We have three years worth of satellite data telling us…"

"Pictures lie, Mainframe! What the hell happened to you?"

"Stand Down, Duke!" the crisp voice exploded from the doorway, which had just slipped open, unbeknownst to the men in the room. Duke spun quickly, then stopped short.

"A-Ten HUT!" he shouted, snapping to a quick salute. All eight other men jumped from their seats and did the same. The man in the door smiled mildly.

"At ease, men. Mainframe…General Hawk reporting for duty as ordered by the Joint Chiefs." The General returned Mainframe’s salute, his familiar brown leather jacket rustling slightly with the motion. The General smoothed out his camouflage pants and took a seat, motioning for the others to do the same. "Duke," he said calmly. "This isn’t Mainframe’s fault. He’s just following orders like the rest of us."

"Understood, sir."

"Now, we’re tracking the progress of this mission through radio contact. Unfortunately a thick cloud cover is preventing a decent satellite feed, but if radio contact is maintained, we will have no problems with the SEAL’s recon team." Mainframe was now more composed. "Does anyone have any questions?"

"I do," said Dial Tone. "Where can we find a good radio?"

# CHAPTER SIX

**FIRST BLOOD**

Night covered the sky like a dark blue/black curtain, completely blocking out all trace of daylight, the off white sliver of moon hanging like the broken shard of a light bulb. In the still water of the ocean, the mirror image of the crescent sat, almost as if transplanted from the darkness of space and planted in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. The water rippled slightly, the white reflection warbling and shimmering like the moon was suddenly reduced to a quivering liquid mass. A quick dart suddenly pounded through the reflection, scattering wavy shards of moon in all directions. The wake roared through and practically erased all trace that the reflection had ever existed. A black raft buzzed over the surface of the water, its powerful engine nearly silent in the dark night. Against the dark skyline, the raft was pretty much invisible. It was crafted in black and deep, dark blue, its sole purpose to allow for easy transportation without being seen. Seven men sat crouched in the large watercraft, equally invisible in the low moonlight. The raft skimmed over the water, bouncing slightly over the rolling waves, and thumping back against the dark water, tearing a shallow path in the ocean’s surface. At the front of the boat a man crouched, dressed like the others in a black rubber wet suit. Quite appropriate attire for this man, as he was Brian Forrest, the Team Leader for the mission. Better known to his former GI Joe teammates as Wet Suit. He crouched low to the floor of the raft, his alert eyes peering out through the opening in his rubber facemask. His well-developed night vision strained and struggled, but against the dark water and the dark sky, he could register little. The well built career S.E.A.L. lowered his silenced machine gun slightly and pulled a mask from his gear bag, which was water proof and lay at his feet, although it was secured to his waist by a long, durable belt. He slipped the mask over his eyes, and twisted a dial, the horizon flickering and coming back into focus a strange green hue. Adjusting the zoom, Wet Suit quickly brought the shoreline into view, though it was still almost half a mile away. He turned towards the rear of the raft.

"Hang it slightly left, Barker. We want to land on the East shore. It’s deep water right up to the rocks, and the shortest distance to snake central." He talked lightly, but did not whisper. The engine was quiet enough to allow for quiet talk, and Wet Suit still was reluctant to shout even though they were out to sea, and the island was supposedly deserted. Barker nodded affirmative, and made the slight adjustment. Wet Suit marveled at how the island had looked in the new satellite pictures they had been briefed with. On his first mission with the GI Joe team, now almost fifteen years ago he had been part of an attack on the huge monster of an island and the Joes had lost that little skirmish. Now Cobra Island looked completely different. There were fewer beaches. Erosion and lack of interest had worn away the sand and dunes, uncovering the jagged, rocky underbelly of the island. All buildings had been almost reduced to cinder in the last large-scale battle between GI Joe and Cobra, now about five years ago. The only building that remained was the Cobra Citadel. Very similar to their former consulate building in New York, it had been constructed shortly before the Joe attack, and was now the last building standing. That last conflict had been deemed a major success for the Joes, even though they had lost men. The Cobra army was pretty much decimated and much of the Cobra hierarchy was thought to have been killed when their escape watercraft had been bombed into oblivion by the remaining Joe air-fighters. Of course, this was Cobra, and those snakes did have a knack for coming back from the dead. Wet Suit promised himself he wouldn’t rule anything out yet. Especially when it came to Cobra. As they drew closer to the large island, Wet Suit glanced back to take an inventory of his men. Just to his left, Groen sat crouched, facing out into the empty sea, his machine gun at the ready. Each weapon had a tactical flashlight mounted to the barrel, as all night landing missions did, just as a precaution. Wet Suit was familiar with Christopher Groen, having served with him on the GI Joe team. Groen was also a Navy S.E.A.L veteran, and Forrest was happy to have him on the team. His Joe code name had been Tracker, and for good reason. His natural senses were insanely acute, almost to the point of being animal-like. These senses were even further enhanced by a black visor that Tracker wore, which was a prototype that he and Low-Light had designed together when they were on the Joe team. It was capable of night vision, thermal readouts, calculating distances, hearing heartbeats, and much more. It was unbelievably expensive to produce, so there were only a few in existence, but Groen always brought one on every mission. Brian Forrest was glad for that. They could use all the help they could get. Next to Groen sat Dickens, a pretty well experienced decent night-fighter. He had been with the Green Berets in Desert Storm, and was a welcome addition to his S.E.A.L. Team. Strapped across his shoulder was an MP-5 just like everyone else carried, tac-light, fixed stock and all. These MP’s were equipped with extended "banana" clips seeing as how the S.E.A.L.s got into hairy missions sometimes, and needed all advantages they could muster. Each man also had shoulder straps underneath the wet suits, with plenty of extra clips and ammo for quick access. Barker was manning the engine at the rear, also keeping his weapon trained on the water behind them should anyone be following. Marsh sat kiddy corner next to Barker, his night vision goggles on and scanning the water, and now the northeast shoreline of the island as they hummed past.

"Any movement?" Wet Suit asked in a low, hoarse whisper. Marsh shook his head negatively. Two men also sat on the other side of Forrest one with an MP-5 and the other with an M-60 slung over one shoulder. Torres gripped his submachine gun like a lifeline, his goggles also deeply scanning the shoreline. Nothing. The place did indeed seem deserted. The man with the M-60 was Ralph Morales, nicknamed Ralphie by his teammates. Ralphie was the resident heavy machine gunner, his massive forearms easily handling the rather large firearm. A belt of heavy caliber bullets was slung over the shoulder of his wet suit, just waiting to be launched at unfortunate hostiles. The raft zipped past an inlet, and Wet Suit could barely make out the burnt out husk of the Terror Drome that once sat there, just beyond the shore. There were thick, plentiful forests throughout that area on the east coast, but numerous battles and combat had worn it down considerably. There were definitely still trees and woods, but not quite as thick as before. If Wet Suit remembered the satellite pictures and his own memory well enough, the treeline ended sharply just a quarter of a mile south from the next inlet. Just ahead, Wet Suit saw where the next inlet curved in towards the center of the island, and quickly motioned to Barker to guide it in quietly. The water had been calm and soothing further out in the ocean, but here, waves slammed and crashed onto the rocky shore, and there was no shallow beach area even this close to shore. The raft slipped in towards the edge of the island, and Wet Suit flashed some quick hand signals that all men had been conditioned to understand as if they were in plain English. The front of the raft gently bumped against the rocks, and Wet Suit and Tracker launched themselves from it, landing gracefully among the rocks and wet dirt. The other five men tumbled over backwards into the dark water, nearly silently, meshing right in with the sounds of the crashing waves. There was a sudden low hiss as the raft swiftly deflated and was sucked and drawn down into the dark ocean water, suddenly replaced by five men in black wet suits. With blinding speed and coordination, the seven men stripped off their rubber diving gear, revealing dark black BDU’s underneath. The quality of the wet suits was so good that the men’s regular uniforms were not even the slightest bit wet. Within seconds, the suits were in weighted gear bags and settled at the bottom of the ten-foot deep water where the raft was curled and tied to a rock itself. The process took about thirty seconds, and now each man wore black uniforms with flack vests and gear strapped to every possible place on their body. They each quickly applied black face paint and black knit masks, then finished off the ensemble with dark gray boonie caps. The S.E.A.L.s were here in force and to take no prisoners.

Far down below the surface and in a restricted area only a handful of people even knew about Mainframe tapped the keyboard with the fluid grace of a ballerina. On the screen in front of him was a radar image of Cobra Island, the path of the S.E.A.L.s mapped out in bright green. He checked his watch briefly and decided that the Navy frogmen were probably hitting the beaches right about now. His mind wandered as he thought back to his past life on the Joe team. *Was Duke right? Have I changed? Become the Washington bureaucrat we all complained about?* He leaned back in his swivel chair and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. He looked down, smiling. The gray uniform felt real good after all of these years. It had been too long, he thought. He’d forgotten about it. The camaraderie. Working as a team instead of for yourself, stabbing others in the back just to step up a pay grade.

"What’s the story, soldier?" A sharp voice echoed in the small office right behind the computer expert. He almost jumped from his chair. Mainframe spun eagerly, and saw Duke standing in the doorway, scowling.

"Yikes, Duke…you scared the crap out of me."

"Came down to check on our boys’ progress. When was the last update?"

"About 0215. They’d just been dumped in the drink by the C-130. As close as they are to the island, radio silence is obviously encouraged."

"Agreed. How’s the timeline pan out?"

"Well…if all is going according to plan, then they are probably just going inland now. Probably right about here." Mainframe pointed a finger to the screen, pressing it against the radar photo, just south of the southeast edge of the forest. The forest on the photo went up to the edge of the volcano, but shortly after that was practically flattened into dry soil and brown dirt. "This is their target here," Mainframe said, pointing his finger again, this time to the cluster of buildings north of the airfield. The buildings were crushed and reduced to rubble, but one tower stood tall among its peers, almost like a king before kneeling worshippers.

"Hopefully won’t be too long now." Duke said, bending over for a closer look.

"Hey, Duke," Mainframe said, turning to face the sergeant. "About earlier. What I said—"

"Drop it, Mainframe. No blood, no foul, pal." Duke smirked his cocky smirk and punched Mainframe lightly on the arm. "I’m heading to my quarters. Give me a buzz when things get interesting."

"Could be a while."

"Good night, Mainframe."

"’Night, Top." Mainframe rested his arm next to his black helmet that lay on the desk just to his right. He smiled. "C’mon, Wet Suit, let’s get this wrapped up. Its bed time."

The shrill buzzer echoed throughout the small chamber, practically throwing the sleeping man from his bed. He reached over to the table next to him and grabbed a cloth object, then pulled the hood down over his sleepy face. Grumbling and cursing he stomped over to the intercom and pressed the call button.

"You have five seconds to convince me not to have you shot," Cobra Commander growled into the speaker.

"Sorry to disturb you," the Tele-Viper pleaded frantically.

"You now have two seconds," The Commander said, very seriously.

"We have visitors, sir. The southeast inlet."

Cobra Commander scowled under his hood. "Who are they?"

"They appear to be some type of operatives. Snakebite has identified them as Navy S.E.A.L.s. They are now approaching the treeline just north of the airfield, sir."

"Hmm. A little close for comfort, I’d say."

"What do you want us to do about it, sir?"

"Is. Doctor Mindbender awake?"

"Of course, sir. He is in the lab."

"Patch me through, Tele-Viper. Next time call Destro. If you wake me up at three in the morning again I’ll have your family killed."

"Y…yes, sir." There was a click.

"Yes, what is it?" the deep voice echoed, sounding very annoyed.

"It is your august leader, Mindbender."

"I beg your pardon, Commander…what can I do for you?"

"What stage is Operation: Shadow on, my dear doctor?"

"Shadow? Well…the process is complete, but the tests are far from finished. I need a little more time."

"You want tests? Tonight Squad One gets a field test."

"But, Commander! These prototypes do not come cheap…if something should happen, I don’t know if we can replace—"

"Release them, Mindbender."

"Cobra Commander, I must obj—"

"Release them, or go out and battle the team of Navy S.E.A.L.s by yourself. I don’t care which. Just do it and do it quick." With a final click, the intercom was plunged into silence.

"Yes, sir." Mindbender grumbled to the dead air. He walked over to the large, elaborate bank of computers that adorned the walls of the lab area. Three Techno-Vipers and a Medi-Viper hovered around them, checking vital stats and important info. "Release Squad One, Techno-Viper four thirteen," Mindbender said matter of factly. The Vipers had heard the conversation, so they immediately obeyed. "Medi-Viper, keep close watch on their physical statistics…blood pressure, heart rate that sort of thing. We are going to watch this first hand."

"Yes, sir," the three Vipers replied. They quickly input commands and Operation: Shadow was online.

Tracker walked slowly, leading the other six frogmen along the south edge of the forest. Some yards away, just south of them the broken down Cobra Airfield sat still in the dark night. The concrete runway was cracked and torn, the hanger destroyed. Tracker even thought he spotted some Rattler and Condor skeletons among the debris. Each man now wore night vision goggles. It was a cloudy night and without them, visibility was only a few feet. Just behind Tracker Wet Suit followed, his weapon pointed to the woods. Ralphie brought up the rear, his M-60 raised and ready, but for emergency use only. Tracker stopped so suddenly, that Forrest almost rear-ended him. A dull hum had quite suddenly burst into Tracker’s ears. An unexpected but almost quiet sound. A throbbing, quiet buzz. He looked around through his goggles, but couldn’t spot anything. His senses were more acute than many, and he thought that it could just possibly be that his ears were ringing. They continued the march forward, and Tracker could now see where the treeline curved north along a paved road that led from the airfield to the Citadel. He zoomed in closer with his visor and still saw no movement. He waved the others on with the all clear signal and they progressed, drawing closer to the edge of the trees. The humming had risen in pitch quite dramatically, and Tracker actually had to stop and grab his ears. He dropped to one knee, but waved the others ahead. Wet Suit stopped next to him, looking down. Tracker looked up and signaled, asking if Wet Suit heard anything. Brian Forrest raised his head, and listened, but then shook his head no. Tracker stood, adjusting the dials on his visor, hoping to tweak the sound, which he was suddenly convinced was some kind of electronic feedback. *Shoot!* He thought, placing both hands on the eyepiece. *I thought we had this thing perfected.* He slowly lifted the black visor from his head, and suddenly shouted. It was big, black and fast, and closing in on him quickly. Two red, piercing eyes squinted through the darkness, and that was all Tracker could see as it flew towards him with blinding speed. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do except draw in a deep breath and—

"UUMMMMPPHHHH!" Tracker screamed quite loudly as the black thing barreled into him with incredible force and speed. It struck him high in the chest with the force of a sledgehammer and threw him roughly into the air, somersaulting and spinning wildly. Wet Suit jumped back in surprise, seeing nothing except his teammate tossed like a rag doll. Tracker struck the hard ground back first, his face contorting and his limbs flailing uncontrollably. Forrest ran over to him, and knelt beside him, concern washing over his face. The other five men, who were a few yards ahead, joined their friends, all looking bewildered.

"What the hell was that?" Barker whispered. He looked down at Tracker who was bleeding considerably from the mouth and nose. His eyes rolled back in his head, then rolled forward, but still didn’t look too stable.

"Groen?" Wet Suit asked briskly. "What hit you, bud?" He ran a hand over his fallen comrade’s chest. He grimaced as he felt what was quite possibly broken ribs. Lots of them.

"Unnhhh…the eyes…" Tracker coughed. More blood spat out and dribbled down his chin.

Wet Suit looked uncertainly at the other S.E.A.L.s. Tracker seemed delirious. Looks like this mission was scrubbed before it began. "Was it an animal, Groen? What was it?"

Tracker rolled onto his side, breathing haggardly.

"C’mon, Ralphie…help me get him up. We’re Evacing right now." Wet Suit pointed to Tracker and Ralphie nodded. Suddenly Wet Suit screamed in pain and stumbled awkwardly backwards. A splash of red burst from his side as he fell to the ground, striking the brown dirt, mere feet away from Tracker. He winced as he fell, his hand clutching at his left side, ribs screaming in pain.

"What the hell?" Ralphie asked quickly, and lifted his machine gun. Dickens knelt immediately beside the team leader.

"That’s a damn bullet wound!" he shouted. "Armor piercing…flew right through the flak jacket."

"I didn’t hear anything. Not even a silenced shot. A gun firing that slug would sure as hell made some noise," Barker shouted nervously, now turning his attention to Wet Suit. "C’mon, guys, let’s get our boys out of here!" Gunfire erupted from the treeline, completely audible this time. It was a loud, ragged, vicious sound and Barker screamed and fell under the barrage of bullets. The muzzle flashes had exploded just yards from where the men were standing. Ralphie spun immediately and squeezed the trigger, keeping the wildly shaking M-60 under tight control. The gun blasted large bore ammunition into the trees, but nothing moved but branches and leaves as the large weapon cleaned them off.

"What the HELL is this?" Ralphie asked, suddenly quite concerned. He twisted some more dials on his night vision goggles, but could still see nothing. The other three set a circular formation around the fallen men. Barker was not breathing, and a large amount of blood stained the ground beneath him.

"Whatever they are, man…they’re toying with us," Marsh said harshly, quickly whipping his weapon around, covering all areas.

"Come out, come out wherever you are!" Torres screamed, laughing, a little hysterically. The night was dark and silent. Bullets tore into the ground just in front of Torres, spitting up chunks of dirt and fountains of pebbles. He stumbled back, cursing in his native tongue.

"What are these things, friggin’ invisible?" he shouted. On the ground, Wet Suit groaned.

"You okay, Forrest?" Dickens asked.

"Yeah…just damn ducky." Wet Suit gripped his wound tightly, but thick crimson still oozed from between his fingers. "What exactly are we dealing with here?" he asked. He was sitting up slightly now, and looked around, but his night vision goggles had been thrown when he was hit. He stared down towards the airfield, and drew a breath.

"Uh, guys," he said in a sharp whisper. "What are those?" he asked, waving a shaky finger towards the runway. The four men turned to look, but shook their heads.

"I don’t see nothing, Forrest," said Torres, squinting through his goggles.

"Those eyes? You don’t see those red eyes?" Wet Suit was a little more frantic now. Four pairs of round, red eyes were luminescent in the dark, just twenty yards away, all lined up along the runway.

"You feelin’ all right? I don’t see anything," Ralphie said. Wet Suit looked up at them and realization suddenly dawned on him.

"The goggles! Take off the damn gog—" Gunfire, loud and long interrupted his pleading, and all he could do was hug the ground. Four assault rifles roared as one in the cool night air, explosions of orange and white-hot intensity blasting from the thick, round barrels. The men did not even struggle with the weapons, even though they were obviously very powerful. The four Navy S.E.A.L.s didn’t even have time to react as the paths of rushing bullets across the open air cut them down. They didn’t shout, scream or swear, they just jerked and fell, then lay still in the dirt of a foreign land. Wet Suit swore loudly at the four attackers as they walked ever closer. The moon was peering out from behind the clouds and a little more light descended upon the airfield. Wet Suit could make out four large men in mostly black leather gear. Each one wore a gray chest plate and black boots. The red eyes stared menacingly from the motorcycle helmets each man wore. On the right side of the chest plate, all of Wet Suit’s fears suddenly came to fruition. The red cobra sigil smiled its toothy grin out at him, as if it had a mind of its own and knew it had just drawn first blood. Wet Suit frowned, and tried to talk, but slumped into unconsciousness. Tracker pried open his eyes just feet away, and shook his head sadly when he saw all of his teammates strewn all over the ground around him.

"You’re alive?" one of the men asked, and Tracker noticed for the first time that there were four rather huge men looming over him.

"W—what hit me?" he asked, still clutching his ribs. The man who spoke to him kneeled beside him.

"We have some good news and bad news for you. Which do you want first?" his voice almost hissed inside the helmet. Tracker could only envision a scaly snakeman face behind the mask.

"Screw you." He said defiantly. He refused to play any of their sick games.

"Heh," the man stood again, laughing quietly. "Well, the good news is, we need someone for questioning, so we don’t need to kill you all tonight."

"I can’t tell you how happy that makes me," Tracker snarled, trying to pick himself up off the ground. A black boot slammed into his ribs and forced him back into the lying position. Tracker sucked in a pain soaked breath, but refused to scream.

"The bad news, my friend, is that we only need ONE person for questioning. And I think the team leader probably knows a lot more than you, huh?"

Tracker scowled, trying to come up with anything rebellious to say. He merely choked out half a snarl before the assault rifle exploded into his forehead.

The meeting was early in the morning, but all were accounted for and present, surprisingly bright eyed and eager. Fort Wadsworth had been closed for quite some time due to budget cuts, reduced Defense Department spending and all that. There were still some buildings there left unoccupied, and it was decided that The Chaplain’s Assistants Motor Pool would be the best place to gather the troops. Most of the ex-Joes knew the location, military vehicles would not look out of place there and the fort was vacated, which allowed for secretive conversation. Before the meeting took place, several men went through the long and painstaking process of screening for electronic devices and soundproofing the motor pool itself, just to safeguard against possible spies or just curious onlookers. This all occurred at the dead of night so as not to alert anyone, and the meeting was happening relatively early on this Sunday morning, in hopes that most of the local Staten Island residents would still be asleep in their beds. The motor pool was jam-packed. It was impossible to calculate the number of years of military experience all of these men had between them, but it was considerable. They shook hands eagerly, told tales of non-violence after the team’s disbandment. The talk was all friendly, as many of these men had not seen each other in half a decade. It was an unusual sight of camaraderie. Navy men talking eagerly to Marines, infantry rubbing elbows with Generals, Army Rangers laughing and joking with men from the Coast Guard. In this room, the affiliations, the rank, the experience meant nothing. These men were equal. They were all the best of the best. They were the GI Joe team. Of course the minute the blonde-haired man in the brown leather bomber jacket stepped up to the podium, things changed.

"A Ten-Hut!" Shouted Duke, the Master Sergeant and field commander of the GI Joe team. General Hawk tapped the podium a little nervously, then cleared his throat and bent down to the microphone.

"Good morning, gentlemen. At ease."

As if one single entity, the crowd of men dropped from attention, spread their legs slightly and crossed their arms behind their back.

"I cannot tell you how good it is to be here with you all again today. Unfortunately, as I’m sure you all know, if we are brought back together all is not right with the world." Hawk let this remark sink in. All of the men present knew this of course, but somehow the boss pointing out the fact just made it more serious than it was previously. "I will, as usual, get right to the point." Hawk stopped for a second and cleared his throat again. He appeared nervous. "We have sufficient reason to believe that Cobra is back in action again." That simple sentence sent a ripple of chatter flowing through the room. Gasps, swears, and violent mutterings echoed in the small, empty garage. "We think we know what they are up to, and we are going to need all of your help to put a stop to it."

"Just tell us where you want us, sir!" Gung Ho shouted with emphasis. Like most of the men in the room, Gung Ho was clad in his old GI Joe uniform, his green hat pulled snugly over his bald head and his vest wide open, proudly displaying the Marine Corps tattoo on his chest.

Hawk chuckled slightly. "We will be getting to that, Gung Ho. First however, I believe that it is my duty to be completely honest with you gentlemen."

Questionable stares and whispers went through the crowd again.

"Some of you are not going to like this, but as you know, I can do nothing about that. What I am about to say is classified information, and is for strict top secret clearance only, understood?"

"Yes, SIR!" came the unanimous, eager reply.

"Five years ago, after the Pit III was closed down due to budget restraints, many of you were relocated and given new positions. Some of you were honorably discharged, and others of you volunteered to leave the armed forces. Quite a few of you made that decision based on the assumption that the GI Joe Team had disbanded. I would hazard a guess to say that about ninety-five percent of you were told that the GI Joe team was disbanded. Well, the uncomfortable truth is this: The GI Joe Team was never disbanded." He let the words sit in the still air, and drew in an uncomfortable breath. Stunned silence permeated the air as the men all glared at their leader in confusion. "It was decided by the top brass that GI Joe would be better off as a much lower scale, even more covert, tight knit group of people not knowingly affiliated with any of the armed forces. The Washington guys chose ten men to be on that team, and the rest of you were placed in other facets of the military."

"Wait a darn minute here, General!" Beachhead shouted angrily from the front row. He wore his green battle suit and black flak jacket. His green mask was tucked in the back pocket of his brown and green camouflage patterned pants. "Are you saying the rest of us weren’t good enough for this team?"

"Yeah!" Shouted Bazooka. "What are we, second stringers?"

"Gentlemen, relax." Hawk said nicely, but with authority enough to tell them that he was still a Brigadier General, after all. "It was decided that most of you could better serve our country in other ways. We had room for ten men, so the ten were chosen and the rest of you were given positions based on your skills and where we thought you would do the most good. The fact that you were even called here today should be proof enough that you’re still considered the best of the best. Most of you men were given jobs instructing the soldiers of tomorrow. Leatherneck and Gung Ho at Parris Island, Torpedo at S.E.A.L. school in Annapolis. Bazooka, you were placed at West Point for crying out loud! We figured the best way for our armed forces to be the best is to be taught by the best. Make no mistake about it, soldiers, you men are the best! If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be here right now."

"There are a lot of guys I don’t see here right now, sir," Recondo said, glancing around the room.

"Steps were made to contact every surviving former member of GI Joe, Recondo. The men that you don’t see were either occupied or turned us down."

Recondo nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer.

Hawk puffed his chest up slightly, invigorated by the conversation. His nervousness had waned to about nothing. "Now, gentlemen? Are we going to sit here and banter back and forth about the screwed up way our political system acts, or are we here to kick some ass and take some names?"

"Kick ass, SIR!" Came the deafening response.

"All right…now before I turn this over to Agent Wilkens," Hawk said, somewhat sheepishly, tipping his head over to the man in the corner in the three piece suit, "I need to know. Anyone who does not want to go through with this, please, the time to exit is now." Hawk leaned back, crossing his arms. Not a single muscle moved in the whole room. "I thought so. Agent Wilkens, the floor is yours," Hawk said, stepping to one side. The well-dressed man stepped up to the microphone and looked out to the stern gazes of the soldiers before him.

"Thank you, General Abernathy." He cleared his throat and pulled out a small stack of printed sheets of paper. "Approximately five days ago, our Northeast Roving S.W.A.T. unit intercepted a shipment of armor plating destined for an unknown location." Shockwave and Low-Light smiled and shot each other satisfied glances, each one getting pats on the back from the surrounding men. "The shipment was sent by a company you should all be familiar with. A company called Military Armament Research Systems. M.A.R.S. for short. A company owned by a known terrorist named James McCullen Destro." The room burst to life in conversation yet again. Agent Wilkens appeared visibly annoyed. "This shipment was being picked up by three helicopters remarkably similar to the FANG model single man helicopters that the terrorist organization known as Cobra has used in the past. Also, the armor plating in the crate we recovered is the same type of plating used in the construction of the HISS tank, a weapon of destruction also formerly used by Cobra. We think this is reason enough to be concerned."

"Are they based on Cobra Island again?" asked Airborne.

"We don’t believe so, no. At 0300 this morning we sent a S.E.A.L. team to investigate Cobra Island. Unfortunately a storm front has since moved in and we are unable to contact them. They are a few hours overdue, but most likely the storm is keeping them ashore. We have maintained satellite coverage of this island religiously for the past three years, and have not once seen a hint of activity."

"Pictures can lie," said Hit & Run, a little harsher than he had planned.

"So I’ve been told," growled Wilkens, squinting at Duke from the corner of his eye.

"What’s our plan of action?" This time it was a new addition to the team asking. An electronics expert and radar jammer by the name of Blackout.

"Well, we have several things in the works. We believe the main target is going to be the Frequency Wave Bomb, code-named: SuperFreak."

The Joes stared blankly at Wilkens when he mentioned the name. "This coming Friday, our President is going to be making a live address to the nation from the Ivy League school he graduated from. This address is going to announce the new Frequency Wave Bomb, a weapon capable of structural destruction, but without the cost of human life. The elections are coming up and we believe this address is going to give a big shot in the arm to the Vice President who is running for election. Super Tuesday is in a week and a half, and this announcement will please the human rights sissies to no end."

The Joes still looked somewhat puzzled. "How do you know Cobra wants this thing?" asked Airborne, who was feeling especially inquisitive.

"Well, we were able to take one man alive at the warehouse attack in Hartford, Connecticut. He attempted suicide by jumping from his helicopter, but a news van below broke his fall somewhat. He said that ‘his brothers’ were planning something big and soon. Said it could crush the country as we know it. This is the closest thing we can come up with. The only reason Cobra is forming up at this specific time." Agent Wilkens was mildly embarrassed at his own lack of solid info, but the Agency felt really strong about this one.

"Do you think The President will be a target?" Chuckles asked.

"We don’t think so. Just to be safe, we will be placing you and Law into his Secret Service crew, but it’s really just a precautionary measure. Project: SuperFreak is being tested that next Sunday, one week from today, and we think that they will strike then, and attempt to steal the prototype."

"Where’s the prototype now?" Gung Ho asked this question.

"Well, if I bandied that information about, it wouldn’t be classified Top Secret, now would it, soldier?" Wilkens sneered a little, glad to finally have a foot up on the military thugs. "We have men stationed at various facilities throughout the country, just to keep everyone guessing. In fact, one member of the GI Joe team is at our facility in Nevada, guarding an empty room."

"All right, Wilkens," Hawk said, stepping back towards the podium. "You’ve given us all the background mumbo jumbo, so what do you want the Joe team to do about this problem? You want us to wait around until Sunday and react when Cobra launches their attack, or are we going to press ourselves and beat them to the punch?"

"The Joe team is not going to ‘wait around’ as you so eloquently put it. They are going to stake out the test location and monitor it for the week, to ensure the project’s safety."

"Wait a minute. You called the team back together and set up this meeting so we can ‘monitor’? That’s it?" Duke glared at the well-dressed man with obvious disdain.

"I cannot stress enough, Sergeant Hauser, the importance of Project: SuperFreak." Wilkens got into Duke’s face and sneered.

"Important to human safety? Or important to the damn election?" Duke stepped one step closer.

"Stand down, Sergeant!" Hawk ordered, stepping up between the two men. "Thank you for the update, Agent Wilkens. I think I can take it from here."

Agent Wilkens nodded and turned, walking stiffly down the podium. He glanced back at Duke as he walked to the side door of the motor pool where there was no doubt a limousine waiting.

"He’s one of them, isn’t he Hawk?" Duke asked, scowling.

"There’s been some shake ups in Washington, Duke. Things are a little out of whack." Hawk spoke quietly, painfully aware that the room full of Joes was watching them.

"But he is, right?"

"Yeah, Duke he is. He’s one of The Jugglers."

"And they’re running the show now?"

"For better or worse, Duke, yeah…The Jugglers are running the show."

# CHAPTER SEVEN

**LAST MINUTES**

Cobra Commander leaned back in the red velvet chair, crossing his arms and looking out at the five men and one woman seated in front of him. His last few words spoken clung to the air like a palpable mist, slowly seeping into the ears and minds of the people surrounding the table. They were in the meeting room once again, the lights dim and the atmosphere tense and foreboding. Adding to the tension, silence almost echoed from the walls in its intensity. Cobra Commander’s enthusiasm, his speech and his gestures had filled the entire room, invisible energy threatening to burst through the walls and roll through everyone present in the room. Now that he had stopped speaking, stopped moving and merely sat there, the room seemed very, very empty. Destro was the first to utter a sound, a low, deep growl of a laugh, starting out as a mere chuckle but before long, laughter roared from his mouth in strong gusts.

"Bravo!" he shouted, obviously pleased. "Cobra Commander, you have outdone yourself! When do we put this plan in motion?"

"Destro, old friend…" Cobra Commander started, leaning back a little more. "It has been in motion for a week now. You’ll notice we have an empty seat at our table…Zartan is putting the finishing touches on phase two right now."

"Zartan knew the ‘master plan’ before you told us, Commander?" Scrap Iron asked, appearing slightly annoyed.

"He knew what he needed to know, Scrap Iron. He is integral to the first part of phase three. It would not be possible without his talents, and the talents of his…family."

"Zandar and Zarana are on board for this one?" Destro asked. Next to him the Baroness coughed. The mere mention of Zarana’s name caused her eyes to roll and her lips to curl into a snarl.

"Yes. Zartan was finally able to turn them around. For this phase of the plan anyway. When he told them what they were doing, the siblings were more than eager to join the fun."

"As long as they don’t stick around afterwards…I don’t trust those louts!" Baroness snarled again.

"We are all well aware of your animosity towards Zarana, Baroness." Destro placed a calming hand on his consort’s arm. She seemed to sooth right down. "So, Commander," Destro continued, now turning his attention back to the hooded man at the head of the table. "When do we begin phase three?"

"Aleph has already initiated the first part of phase three…he and a small group of Night Vipers are preparing for the assault as we speak. You and The Baroness will be joining him promptly. The timing will have to be impeccable. On all parts. If one group moves too soon, the whole mission is jeopardized. We must make sure all of our movements are synchronous. This whole plan revolves around timing…that is the core of it."

"Are Zartan and his siblings aware of this, Commander? It would seem to me, that Zandar and Zarana are the weak link in this whole equation." Doctor Mindbender pointed this fact out.

"Zarana and Zandar are icing on a well baked cake. They are not vital to the plan’s success, but their existence and participation make it that much more viable. They are important, but their parts in this are mere extras in this great production. I’m sure none of you doubt Zartan’s credentials. He will make sure everything flows smoothly."

"We will take your word for it, Commander," Destro said, and stood. "Well, we do not have time for too much socializing. We’ve got a country to cripple, my brothers," he said with pride, turning to his fellow Cobra members. "Cobra Commander has put his faith in us, and I am certain that this is a feasible plan of action. One that, if pulled off correctly, will put our organization in the history books. Come now, we have much to prepare for!" Destro raised a triumphant fist. "COBRA!!" he screamed defiantly. For the first time in a long time, Destro’s emotions were solidly behind this battle cry. The remaining men stood as well, raising their own fists.

"COBRA!!" They all replied. Cobra Commander smiled broadly underneath his cloth hood, which swayed slightly as the men walked by him towards the exit. Overlord hung back and waited for the others to leave then approached his leader.

"Cobra Commander. I do not know how to say this." He said slowly, his eyes nervous behind his monocle. He ran a hand through his short, slick black hair, and tugged at his red tunic.

"Get on with it, Overlord." Cobra Commander said, exasperated.

"I’m afraid that I am going to have to terminate our partnership," he said, finally composing himself.

The silence reverberated after the statement as Cobra Commander cocked his head and glared at the man in front of him. He placed his gloved hands firmly on the table and stood slowly. "Oh, really?" He was face to face with Overlord for the second time in less than two days.

"Yes. If this plan you are suggesting fails…well, my business fails with it. I have sunk too much money into this endeavor as it is."

"I grow tired of this constant pessimism, Overlord. What makes you think this plan will fail?"

"I don’t know, Commander…but even if it succeeds, I don’t think I want my company name affiliated with what you are proposing! It would be monetary suicide!"

"Your continued arguing with me may be considered another form of suicide, Overlord. Your company is in this lock, stock and barrel whether you like it or not."

"I was not aware of the consequences of—"

"Shut up, Overlord! You were well aware and you know it! That little twisted heart inside your chest loves the idea of this masterpiece that I have devised. Your soul is just as black as mine is, if not blacker! Do not pretend that you didn’t know what you were getting into just to alleviate your conscience!"

"You’re right, Commander! I do like this plan!" Overlord stepped closer to his Commander, their masks now almost touching. "If this succeeds, then this organization will be the most feared organization on the planet! I don’t want to be a part of that organization. I want to LEAD that organization!" Overlord punctuated that last point by slamming his closed fist hard on the wood table. Sweat slowly ran down his face and over his gold mask that covered his mouth. He began to compose himself. He stood back slowly, brushing himself off, then swiftly drew a pistol from a holster on his thigh. It was an automatic pistol, the barrel hovering just inches from Cobra Commander’s broad chest. The silver Cobra emblem seemed to be glaring menacingly at the weapon. The Commander maintained his composure and actually smirked behind the hood.

"Well, you’ve got guts…I admire that, Overlord. I admire that very much." He shrugged and appeared very composed, relaxed even. "That admiration won’t stop me from ripping your spine from your lifeless corpse, however."

Overlord growled and raised the weapon to fire. A nearly silent metallic sound echoed in the dark, closed room. Just as Overlord prepared to pull the trigger, a cold sensation drifted across his neck. He paused, his eyes wandering, his trigger finger shaking just centimeters from the point of contact. Just at his jugular, a long, silver katana pressed firmly against his skin. The flesh actually puckered slightly where the glimmering sword touched. The weapon was firm and lifeless, as if held there by some magical force, and Overlord could see no one holding it. He shifted his gaze slightly. Cobra Commander swatted the gun from his hand and cursed. "I wouldn’t look if I were you. If you do see her face, then she will have to kill you." Cobra Commander was surprisingly calm and articulate. Overlord stood motionless next to the table, a stock still human statue. The shadows fell around the room, completely blocking off the holder of the weapon. The sword was at a slight upward angle, so whoever held it was shorter than the would be victim.

"Overlord, Overlord, Overlord," Cobra Commander muttered, pacing comically in front of the petrified masked man. "What am I going to do with you?"

"C—Commander…I—"

Cobra Commander lunged suddenly, all composure drained from his body and left floating in the air. With his left fist he grabbed a handful of red tunic and pulled Overlord’s frightened, sweating face just inches away. The sword pressed harder against his neck as he was pulled forward.

"You DARE? You would point a weapon at ME? I should have you decapitated where you STAND!" The Commander’s eyes were a raging inferno, boring deep into Overlord’s psyche. "But…"Cobra Commander released his grip slightly and stepped back. "Against my better judgment…I am going to let you live."

Overlord let out a breath until the cold hard steel pressed again, just slightly, to remind him of its presence. "Commander…I’m sorry. I don’t know what came ov—"

"Speak one more word, Overlord, and I will use your severed head for a soccer ball."

Overlord halted his speech and nodded briskly.

"As I have told you in the past, you do have a devious tactical mind. In the coming weeks, I will have need of such a mind. Also, we may need extra funding. You will provide that funding with no questions asked. Am I correct in that assumption?"

Overlord nodded briskly again.

"I thought so. Let me make something very clear though, Overlord. Do not misconstrue this as mercy on my part, for rest assured, it is not. As much as I hate to even think it, Overlord, at this point I need you. Your money and your planning will help ensure this plan’s success. But I will have no more rebuttals from you, verbal or physical. If you try my patience again I will have you drawn and quartered, then skewered and placed on my mantle. Are we clear?"

Overlord nodded again, shame coming over his face. He sighed like a man beaten and the sword whipped away. Overlord winced as the blade was pulled away, but a little too close. A long red smear drew from one side of his neck to the other. Blood slowly trickled from the wound and the masked man placed a hand over it.

"You see, I am never alone…you will never catch me unaware. My guardian angel is always close by."

Overlord spun quickly, but whoever had been holding the sword had somehow vanished in a small, locked room. The defeated man hung his head slightly and walked out the door towards the command center, from which a corridor would lead him to his quarters. The room was left in silence.

"I could finish the job, father. I would enjoy it." Whisper emerged from the shadows as the door swung shut, and stopped by her father’s side.

"I will call on that favor, my dear…some time. But now is not the time for in-fighting."

"I understand, father."

"There is much to be planned for, my dear. The very thing you have trained your whole life for. In a mere four days, that training will culminate. Are you nervous?"

"No, father. I know I will persevere. I have been given other assignments…all completed with no hesitation and no consequences."

"Yes, my dear Whisper, I know. Many of my followers are either highly dedicated idiots, or very intelligent traitors-in-waiting. You, my wonderful daughter…you are skilled, intelligent, and devoted. You are my prize." The proud father smiled underneath his hood, and placed a consoling hand on his daughter’s shoulder. "Come now, darling Whisper…you must prepare. I want you in your special training room until you leave tomorrow morning. Leave some time for rest, but not too much. I want you to be in top form. It will take you all week to prepare. Do not let me down, Whisper. I do not tolerate failure, even from you. Do not forget that." Cobra Commander’s eyes became stern and unforgiving under the hood. Whisper’s gaze never faltered.

"I know, father. If I fail, I will be fully prepared for my punishment."

"That’s my girl," Cobra Commander smiled again and hugged his daughter. She returned the hug, then broke free and melted back into the shadows. Cobra Commander smiled admirably underneath his flowing cloth cowl then turned and walked out the door into the command center. Two Crimson Guard Immortals immediately joined his side from their posts on either side of the door, and matched pace with him as he began his walk across the large, round room. His eyes wandered throughout the sprawling banks of computers, Tele-Vipers and Techno-Vipers diligently monitoring every one of them, from radar screens and worldwide news programs, to stock quotes and island mounted video cameras. Snakebite was overseeing the whole process, then when he spotted the Commander, he quickly left his post and rejoined him.

"What went on in there, sir?" he asked. "Overlord came out, looking like he saw a ghost."

"Perhaps he did, Snakebite…how are the stocks performing?"

"Excellently, Commander. Pretty soon we should have no need for that swine Overlord and his filthy company money."

"Good news." They continued their walk side by side, out of the command center and into the main hallway. "Tell me, how did Project: Shadow operate last night?"

Snakebite shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Mindbender’s got all of the information on that. I do know that there was one of them left for interrogation, but the others are all gone and ‘buried at sea’, shall we say?"

"More good news. And they were able to stay within the time constraints?"

"Yes, sir." Snakebite shook his head yes and let his left arm dangle by his side, his shotgun swaying slowly from his clenched fist. The two Immortals had lagged back some to give their two bosses their time for conversation, but they still matched paces, only a few feet behind. Each of them carried an AK-47 for the Commander’s protection.

"Very good. I’m going to tour the grounds, my good man. Resume your duties at the Command post, and I will rejoin you later."

"As you wish, sir." Snakebite nodded and broke off the walk, turning and walking back into the central chamber. Cobra Commander strode proudly down the hallway, thinking back to when he’d started construction on this underground fortress. He had actually gotten the idea from the GI Joe team, an irony that pleased him to no end. After an attack on the GI Joe base of operations in Staten Island, New York, Destro and he were trapped in their underground base for several days. That experience plus, the Commander’s memory of an earlier attack fueled his creative juices. The earlier battle was pretty early in the GI Joe history books. They had been willing to sacrifice an above ground headquarters simply to keep their massive underground base of operations hidden. *The Pit,* Cobra Commander remembered with a hint of a shudder going through his body. He had been trapped down there for a while, and was thought dead…it had been a horrendous several days of hopelessness and claustrophobia until Destro located that drilling machine that provided their escape. Frankly, Cobra Commander was surprised that he could even tolerate being underground both with that traumatic experience and being buried in a shallow grave after being shot by a traitorous Crimson Guard. Surprisingly, the underground fortress was soothing and relaxing to the Commander; an escape away from public view, a sanctuary and a home. Vipers and Crimson Guardsmen wandered about the hallway, coming from different sections of the base, and Cobra Commander took a sharp left, his bodyguards close behind. He could hear the sounds coming from the training room as he approached. Sporadic gunfire, martial arts class, and even the muffled explosion of a shaped charge going off. The metal door stood before him, a Viper on each side of it, weapons raised. They stood down immediately as the Commander approached and the door slid open with a soft whoosh. Two Vipers stood on the other side of the door as well, and they lowered their arms and stood at a stiff attention as he wondered by. The training area sprawled out before him, almost the size of a large arena, but only half filled with instructors and eager students. Cobra Commander was impressed by the sheer size of it, and satisfied with the result of a decade of hard work. Much of the construction had been done using a rugged column of land that anchored the island to the ocean floor. The column was the size of the island and attached it to the floor almost a mile below the island’s surface. After a barrage of tests and studies, the Techno-Vipers had determined that the column was strong enough to dig into and construct their massive underground bunker. They had done the majority of the work after Cobra Commander’s return from the dead, disguising construction vehicles as military weapons of destruction, and working primarily under cloud cover and at night. Once Cobra had been thought disbanded, the task got more difficult, but thanks to Destro’s inside sources they were able to avoid recon satellites and spy planes. By that time, too most of the building had been completed, and they only needed to furnish the underground fortress with computers, weapons and other such necessities. It had felt like forever, but Cobra had finally regrown to almost its normal amount of men, and there was a definite plan of action, and Cobra Commander felt truly alive for the first time in many years. His eyes soaked in the entire training area. The Dreadnoks were in one corner of the massive arena, demonstrating explosives and other such forms of wanton destruction. Vipers at this point were doing much of the teaching, seeing as Zartan was occupied, and Destro and The Baroness were setting about to finish off their part of the master plan. A Night-Viper was instructing men in blue fatigues and black facemasks on the principals of marksmanship, sniping, and night vision. A Tele-Viper was leading the class in a lecture on the ins and outs of the Cobra communications system and how to read much of the worlds radar information. In the center of the big room, a new addition to the Cobra team, a Phantom Viper was teaching martial arts and stealth practices. This special forced Cobra trooper also demonstrated the benefits of close quarter combat and infiltration. The Phantom Vipers were formally known as the Night Creepers, a group of technological ninjas, relying on a combination of martial arts prowess and technical savvy to achieve the goals of their employer whomever it may be. After the last battle with GI Joe, both the Night Creepers and Cobra had been nearly finished off by the combined attacks of the Joe military unit and the Ninja Force commandos. Unfortunately, most of the Ninja Force members had perished in the conflict, but the Night Creepers were beaten and broken, their numbers nearly dwindled to nothing. The Night Creeper Leader, Aleph and Cobra Commander came to a mutual agreement to join forces, and the Phantom Vipers were born. A team of Special Forces stealth commandos, specializing in infiltration, espionage, and even assassination. Aleph now served as the Phantom Viper leader, and was allowed some respect in the Cobra hierarchy, stock options and all. It was a beneficial agreement for all involved, giving Aleph and the Phantom Vipers financial security, and giving Cobra some highly skilled, vicious agents and Aleph’s connections to the terrorist underworld, which had helped Cobra Commander’s recruitment efforts endlessly. To the right of the arena area, a SAW Viper and Alley Viper were leading a class in the uses of machine guns and urban warfare, including marksmanship, loading and unloading, and general weapons expertise. Cobra Commander turned to the right and bypassed the elevator leading down to the training area, instead walking to another door situated in the right wall of the training room’s spectator balcony. Three Vipers and one Crimson Guard, which alone signified an area of great importance guarded this door. The Commander proceeded through the door with no interference and ended up in a small elevator with room for him, his two Immortal bodyguards, and maybe two other people. The Immortal on the right pushed a button marked ‘L’ and the elevator hummed softly and descended briskly. A quiet ding signified the elevator’s destination and the doors slid smoothly open, revealing a medium sized room packed to the gills with computers, monitors and other technological marvels. The room looked like something out of a science fiction movie, although each item in the room was a useful and important item to the operation. Two Techno-Vipers turned and stood at attention as Cobra Commander walked in, his head turning slowly to take in the hustle and bustle around him. More Techno-Vipers and Medi-Vipers scurried around as Cobra Commander entered, flipping switches, moving levers and watching readouts. In the center of the room six large, human sized test tubes loomed high above everyone in the room. Each clear tube contained a thick, cloudy liquid with human forms barely visible behind the glass. Oxygen masks were submerged in the liquid and placed over the subject’s faces, which were indeterminable inside the tube. Cobra Commander walked slowly around the left side of the tubes and saw who he was looking for, the bald, mad scientist hurriedly adjusting various things. Doctor Mindbender had gone back to wearing his long, flowing black cape, but out of necessity, still wore the cybernetic attachment on his eye and the large black device attached to his chest to keep his heart going. Mindbender could no longer live without this large makeshift "pacemaker" a result of being buried with the other Cobra hierarchy in the freighter by Cobra Commander himself. The Commander had later regretted this decision and cloned Mindbender with raw material he had, but could not perfect the clone, which needed the pacemaker merely to keep his heart beating. Doctor Mindbender was surprisingly forgiving, figuring that even though Cobra Commander had killed him, he had also brought him back to life as well. Mindbender squatted down and adjusted two more dials near the base of the contraption that housed the six tubes. As he stood, he brushed off his dark purple pants and looked over at Cobra Commander.

"Cobra Commander…I just saw you at the meeting. To what do I owe this honor?" he asked in his best imitation mad scientist voice.

"I am coming to check the progress of Project: Shadow, Mindbender. Can you fill me in? How did my children perform last night?" Cobra Commander looked up at the tubes and ran his gloved hand along the smooth surface of one of them.

"They did very well…the new stealth suits need improvement."

"Why is that?" The Commander asked, turning slightly.

"Well, apparently last night, the noise dampening field malfunctioned on suits one and three. Machine gun noise was heard quite clearly and alerted the patrol to their presence. They were spotted and nearly shot."

"Being spotted and being shot are two completely different things, Mindbender. Even without the stealth suits, these magnificent Shadow Vipers would be a force to be reckoned with."

"Definitely, Commander. Using the Star Vipers’ already enhanced bodies as a template was a stroke of genius. The new scientific marvels these days allowed vast and numerous improvements over the reflexes, speed, and ruthlessness of even the Star Viper."

"How long must they stay in these tubes, Doctor?"

"They need the chemical bath for nutrients to adjust to normal life. Their quicker metabolism forces them to consume much more nutrition than an average human. We are using the chemical baths to ween them down to normal food consumption. They should be out of the tubes full time in a few days."

"Excellent. How are the bikes coming along?"

"Well, we have one motorcycle completed and it passed last night with flying colors. The sound dampening field and new composite stealth alloy we came up with is successful in hiding it from all sources of electronic detection. Motion sensors, infrared, thermal, night vision, and sonar, anything you can think of. The only way to make it more undetectable would be to make it invisible! It is a great improvement on the Python Patrol technology we used as a basis."

"I am proud, Mindbender. After years of failure, it seems that everything is finally coming together. Keep up the good work, Doctor!" Cobra Commander patted Mindbender on the shoulder and returned to the elevator still flanked by his Crimson Guard Immortals. The door hissed shut and the elevator rose, bringing the blue clad dictator back up to the balcony. He emerged from the elevator and walked briskly to the main hallway again, turning right and heading back to the command center. His shiny boots clomped heavily on the concrete floor and his majestic hood swayed over his shoulders. The Commander felt like whistling, but decided that would be unbecoming of a man of his stature. Just as the Commander entered the central chamber, he turned slightly right, heading towards a door wedged in between computer terminals on the right wall. The door led to the Cobra hierarchy’s quarters and was not public domain. Two more Crimson Guard Immortals stood guard by this door, and snapped straight up when he approached. There was another door directly across the room from this one, which led to the motor pool, currently packed with vehicles under construction as well as fully assembled ones, which were ready for action. Cobra Commander toyed with the idea of a surprise inspection, but decided he didn’t want to bother Wild Weasel and Scrap Iron, the current Cobra motor pool supervisors. The motor pool contained another way out of the underground headquarters, a long, spiral staircase that ended up in the broken down watchtower at the west end of the former Cobra Airfield. There was a third exit and entrance as well an escape shaft that led from Cobra Commander’s very bedroom up into the bunker like citadel which sat in the center of what was formerly Cobra Headquarters above ground. The door slid open and Cobra Commander walked in, his two guards stopping and joining the other two in guard duty by the door. It eased closed behind the Commander, and he was in a nicely lit hallway with soothing lighting and a plush red carpet. Doors led off of the right and left of the hallway, each room guarded by a retinal and voice scanner to allow access only to those allowed. Of course Cobra Commander could open any doors he wanted, but he had little desire to see what happened in those rooms, especially The Baroness and Destro’s. He shuddered slightly at the thought, but continued his walk down to the end of the hall where his master suite sat. He approached the door and stool still as the red beam cris-crossed over his hood and into his eyes.

"King Cobra, Alpha-One," he said in monotone.

"Confirmed," the tin voice replied and the door slipped open. The room was large and elegant, a huge king sized bed in red with canopy and all on the far wall. Bookcases packed the walls of the room, covering two and a half of them. In the far wall next to the bed, his walk in closet stood, door open, and battle gear hung neatly on hangers. A blue helmet with a silver faceplate sat on a pedestal next to the large bed, and the florescent lights flickered and gleamed off of its sheer surface. A large bathroom was off of the left wall, bookcases covering the wall right up to the entrance. On the right wall, across from the bathroom, was a nicely organized study, with even more books and a cutting edge computer and alarm system on a thick, oak desk. From this computer, Cobra Commander could access anything in the base, from radar and camera feeds from the command center, to footage of the training area or simple Internet access. He wandered into the study and sat at the desk, turning the computer on and leaning back in his comfortable chair.

"I hear you’re looking for me," a gravelly voice whispered from behind the Commander, and he leaped from his chair. He spun with a shout and drew a pistol from his thigh-mounted holster, then leveled it at the intruder. His breathing eased slightly when he saw whom it was, and he lowered the weapon slowly.

"You have got to learn how to knock!" he said nervously.

"I try to remain incognito. My job requires that, Commander. Besides, I find defeating supposedly unstoppable security systems…stimulating."

"I understand. Still, if I die of a heart attack, who pays your expenses, Firefly?"

The masked man stepped out of the shadows, his gray camouflaged uniform somewhat out of place in this setting. "Well, your next of kin, of course…you do still have a daughter." His voice was a thick hoarse whisper, a lifetime of speaking in hushed tones and living in silence. His sabotage skills were known throughout the world, but in recent times, he had devoted his time to Cobra.

The Commander cringed slightly at Firefly’s unintentional barb. "Well yes, Firefly…I have been looking for you. I see your inside sources are as good as always."

"Yes, Commander." Firefly was a man of few words.

"This is the next phase of our plan." Cobra Commander reached below his desk and produced a locked, security guarded briefcase. "I want you to assure Whisper’s safe passage."

Firefly huffed slightly. "I’m no babysitter."

"Firefly, you are the one person I can fully trust. Your allegiance is your wallet, and nothing else. There is payment in your numbered account already. Please."

"All the details in here?" he asked, lifting the briefcase. Cobra Commander nodded. "Don’t think this is going to become a habit." Firefly looked deep into Cobra Commander’s eyes, his eyes squinting and piercing behind the gray camouflage facemask. His brow was furrowed in mild frustration, but he knew it was an easy assignment. He had checked his Swiss Bank account earlier in the day, too. The Commander was paying quite handsomely for this particular service.

"I knew I could count on you, Firefly."

Firefly nodded slightly and dashed past the Commander and out the door into the bedroom, briefcase in hand. The hooded man heard the door whisper open, then close easily. He hoped Firefly wouldn’t change his mind once he read about all of the details. In the back of his mind, Cobra Commander knew he would consider it a challenge, and that he could count on him. He sat back down in his chair and pressed his fingers to the keyboard. As he began by checking stock prices, he couldn’t hold in the emotion any longer and began whistling a mysterious happy tune.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

**THE PLAN UNFOLDS**

Four days passed like a case of the hiccups and Friday was soon upon them. The meeting at Staten Island was little less than a week behind them. For four straight days every one of The President's advisors begged and pleaded for him to cancel this address, or to at least do it from a more secure location, but The President refused outright. Two members of the design team for Project: SuperFreak had come from his very Alma Mater, and he couldn’t resist doing a nationwide address from the Ivy League school that had produced him as well as two top ranked scientists in the field. It was just too perfect. And on an election year, too…in The President’s eyes, this pretty much synched his Vice President’s spot as his successor. But the leader of the nation was sincerely excited about Project: SuperFreak for other reasons than just political. That was another reason why he was so adamant about doing this nationwide address as soon as the full specifications were available. The advisors wanted to keep that classified for a while longer still, but The United States President was too eager to share his excitement. The school he had graduated from so many years ago was located in a fairly small New England town, far away from the hustle and bustle of big cities, and nestled next to the Connecticut River in central New Hampshire. Theoretically speaking, it was a very good place, security wise, to hold a national press conference. There were only a few main entrances to the downtown area, and all entrances could be sealed and defended very easily. Only a select few of the aides knew the breaking news about Cobra and they had no desire to start a full-scale panic, so they kept their personal fears to themselves. They all figured that this was way too high profile for the large terrorist group and their target would be the machine itself, undergoing final tests in two days. In fact, Washington bureaucrats were so convinced that a Cobra attack was happening in two days that they were preparing an elaborate scam to draw them out for a GI Joe ambush. Project: SuperFreak was not even going to be in action that day, just a mock-up serving as a trap, with almost the whole GI Joe force waiting in ambush. A textbook plan, one that most Washington bureaucrats felt was guaranteed success. Unfortunately, most Washington bureaucrats had never dealt with Cobra before. The address tonight was occurring at a rather large lecture hall directly across the street from the green of the school, right next to Main Street, with another street intersecting just next to it. Main Street actually ran down the west side of the auditorium and was home to many quaint little shops and local hangouts, and even the local school’s famous bookstore. All of these businesses would be closed at the time of the address, most of them closed by five o’clock anyway, except for the coffee shop and the Irish pub, which would be asked to close early for security reasons. It was late afternoon, almost evening; the sky already faded to a dull gray and the sun was pretty much out of sight. It was New England in March, and it got dark relatively early. The shops down Main Street had been closed all the way to Allen Street, which is where the Secret Service had the road roped off. Two black sedans sat diagonally in the middle of the road, several men in black suits and sunglasses milling around. If someone looked carefully, snipers could be spotted on several roofs, one even pacing on the roof of the bookstore, just in case. At the intersection of Main Street and the street running north of the lecture center more sedans blocked the traffic flow, assuring that no one unauthorized could even drive by the large, glass covered building. A proud placard displayed on the front of the center read "Presidential Address: Live to the Nation Tonight!" The rounded roof jutted up into the gray sky, three men in black roaming around up there. More sedans sat just beyond the center, positioned similarly to the other groups, and this section of the rich, Ivy League town was secured. Chuckles and Law wandered around on the sidewalk outside of the lecture hall and theatre center, each dressed for the occasion in black suits and headphones connected by the curly wires the Secret Service were known for. They were actually here undercover, no members of Secret Service or even The President himself aware that they were members of the GI Joe team and not even part of the coveted Secret Service.

"Gonna be a boring night, eh, hombre?" Law asked, frowning. Chuckles thought he looked strange with no dog by his side. Order had grown too old to be of much use as a police dog, and Law just didn’t have the heart to replace him. Order was now officially Law’s pet and stayed at his home for most of the time, taken care of a professional dog-keeper when Law was away.

"Let’s hope so, Law. Excitement is a bad thing when The President’s in town."

"So, where’s your post?" Law asked, checking his watch quickly.

"I’m in the backstage area, behind the curtains. Only man posted there. You?"

"I’m way in the east end of the building on the other side. Part of a roving security team. Probably won’t even see The President."

"Hello, boys," Agent Rooks approached the Joes, his walk stiff and his glare deadly serious. "We almost ready to get this ball rolling?" Agent Rooks was the senior Agent in charge, and the leader of this little "operation". He had two decades of service experience, and took his job very seriously, as did all Secret Service members. Agents Miller, French, and Biggs flanked him. Miller was a large man by any standards, standing taller and broader than the two Joes. His face was nondescript, which was just the way the service liked it. The less you stood out the better it was. Agent French was a female Agent, which was more and more prevalent in these days. She was on the short side, and not very intimidating, but Chuckles still wouldn’t want to be on her bad side. You didn’t get this job by looking pretty, that’s for sure. Agent Biggs was a normal looking man, dark skinned and focused. His eyes were trained on the lecture hall and didn’t move an inch while they stood there.

"Yes, sir," Chuckles said. The President would be going on in about three hours, so they had to make sure all was ready. The six agents turned and walked into the building, shutting out the gray sky behind them.

Almost a complete country away, Stalker leaned back comfortably in his swivel chair which sat by a bank of computers and monitors that the Joe did not know how to use. He was here in Nevada as a decoy, plain and simple. He knew it, but it didn’t bother him…it was an easy job. He was dressed in his regular gear, a green and brown camouflage uniform and the whole nine yards. His always-present beret sat firmly on his head, slightly angled, proudly baring the badge of the Army Rangers. He stroked his thick black mustache and leaned forward, looking intently into the monitors, but seeing nothing. Another man sat not ten feet away, also next to some monitors, but he was constantly flipping switches, turning dials and bringing pictures into focus. He was a young kid, had glasses and short cropped brown hair. Probably not the most popular kid in school, but also probably making a heck of a lot more money right now than many of his more popular classmates.

"Hey, kid!" Stalker shouted, leaning back a little further. "I’ve been here a week now, man…what the heck are we guarding?" Stalker felt like goading the kid a little. He knew there was an empty room behind him, but he didn’t know if the kid knew or not.

"Nothing of importance, sir," the kid said, obviously a little intimidated by the grizzled man in camouflage sitting ten feet away.

"But there is something here, right?"

"Well, yeah…I guess so. Just nothing the bad guys would want. Prototype semi-conductors. Nifty little gizmos that we don’t quite know what to do with yet."

"Hmm…that’s Washington for ya, huh, kid?"

The kid laughed a little then turned serious. "You wanna know something, sir?" he asked quietly, then wheeled his chair over closer. In the large, metal room the sound echoed for seemingly forever. The room was huge and cavernous, with windows on two of the far walls. The roof sloped at the top like a dome, but the walls became straight on the sides, which gave the room a somewhat hexagonal shape. Stalker and the young kid were stationed at banks of monitors in the center of the room, facing a series of three doors. One door led to the hallway to the exit, and the other doors were the decoy doors, supposedly leading to empty rooms.

"Okay, kid, spill it. Long as it’s not classified." Stalker smirked at that idea. No way this green kid knew anything top secret.

"Those prototype conductors? I think they might be using those for something important. A lot of attention getting paid to them lately."

"And they are actually here?"

"Yeah, but no one knows that…and no one really knows if they’re important or not. Just my theory."

"Good theory, kid. Ever have any problems here, out in the desert?"

"Nope. Peace and quiet, all year round. It’s nice."

"Yeah, nice," Stalker said quietly, hoping the peace and quiet would stay, at least through tonight.

About five miles away, a group of men had set up camp and were in a lighted tent, hunched over tables, studying blueprints and maps. Destro could see the tents, shining like beacons in the afternoon sky as he glided quietly over in his small white Claw jetpack. The Baroness followed closely behind, humming along at a good clip, just thirty feet above the ground. It was nothing but desert out here, so they were not worried about being seen. The advantage to having a military institution way out here was privacy, but the disadvantages were lack of security and lots of places to coordinate an attack. Also, it would take help quite a long time to get here. The base was small, too. Nothing that a good squad couldn’t take care of. Destro and The Baroness circled tightly, then landed on the tight dirt, their legs buckling slightly under the impact. The jets blasted plumes of sand into the cool air until they were cut, drifting the tepid desert day into silence once again. The two operatives lay down their packs and opened up little cargo doors on each one, quickly pulling out specially camouflaged tarps, which they then draped over the white jets to hide them from view. There was one large tent, a small light bulb hanging from the support, clearly seen through the vinyl surface. Destro and The Baroness walked towards it when suddenly a group of men burst out from the desert sand around them. Small columns of desert sand exploded into the air and sprinkled down around the two surprised Cobra Agents as the men’s forms rose from the depths of darkness. Five men in total, in brown and tan, with specially designed face masks to filter dirt, red goggles and cloth hoods to keep out the scalding heat. Each man held an automatic machine pistol, and each one was pointed at the two operatives. Destro was not amused.

"Yes, very good…you surprised us. Now stand guard, you fools! We have plans to go over!" The five Desert Scorpions nodded and rested their weapons, each one proud that their superior desert training by Cobra had indeed paid off. Destro and The Baroness entered the tent, where Aleph and a group of ten Night-Vipers were going over the plan of action for the base tonight. Aleph raised his head to signify that he saw them enter, but then got right back down to business. He looked somewhat out of place in a desert environment, in his blue shirt and gray tiger stripe camouflaged pants. But they were planning to attack at dusk, where that color scheme would be very advantageous.

"All right. The Desert Scorpions have already been briefed. They will be used for backup only, hiding in the desert surrounding our escape route. We attack at six-fifteen sharp. Planning must be exact! I take it we have all synchronized our watches?" Nods all around the table confirmed this. "We will begin to scale the building at seventeen forty-five on the dot. That should give us plenty of time. We attack through the windows, take out any guards, take the goods and split. We will be running southeast until the Cobra Transport helicopter can rendezvous with us for evacuation. The Desert Scorpions will be guarding our tails. Any questions?"

Destro cleared his throat. "What exactly do you need us for?"

"We don’t," Aleph said, none too kindly. "But Cobra Commander thinks I need a babysitter. Plus, you know exactly what to look for in that base. I wouldn’t know it from a hole in the ground. Any more questions?"

No one had any, so the meeting was closed and the weapons passed out.

The auditorium was kept within reasonable control, capacity limited to reporters and professors at the school. A few political science majors were allowed in the auditorium as well, doing research for potential projects to end their university career. A podium was set up on a small stage at the front of the hall, the bleachers rising up in stadium style seating were only about half full. The Presidential Seal was etched into the wooden podium, which stood centered, about ten feet in front of two easels that had specific information regarding the weapon that The President would be addressing the nation about tonight. There was a gathering of Secret Service agents roaming around the stage area, combing for any unknown items or unauthorized visitors. The President himself was behind the flowing black curtain with his aides and even more agents garbed in black. A barrage of video cameras plastered the front row of seats, representing every major network in the country. The TV trucks were all parked haphazardly out in front of the auditorium, their satellite antennas beaming signals to millions of television sets across the country and the world. Reporters lined up behind the cameras, eager to ask questions, and eager to ask the questions that would get them noticed. It was approaching the nine o’clock hour, Eastern Standard Time, and with each network going live at that point, there were people milling around everywhere, just to make sure everything was exactly right. As the minutes passed, the numerous Secret Service agents dispersed some fading into the audience, some posted at the entranceways, and quite a few merely spread out along the edges of the stage. At 8:59 a multitude of red lights on the array of video cameras flickered on and the collective whirring of videotape was heard throughout the lecture hall. A young woman in a gray suit walked slowly out to the podium. She bent over slightly and put her face close to the microphone.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, The President of the United States." Camera flashes burst throughout the lecture hall, all lenses aimed at the podium on the front stage. The President slipped out from behind the black curtain, flanked by Secret Service, though they were far enough away for the cameras to not pick them up. He smiled as he walked and stopped behind the podium, adjusting the microphone slightly. He cleared his throat and began to speak.

Chuckles peered out around the edge of the curtain as The President walked up to the podium. Every Secret Service agent who had been back there followed him up, flanking and surrounding the edge of the stage area. Chuckles though it odd that he was the only one hanging back, but he figured Agent Rooks, who set up the arrangement, had enough experience under his belt to know what he was doing. He moved his eyes back and forth, checking any available exits next to the stage. The black curtain parted slightly to his right, on the right edge of the broad, wooden platform, but he couldn’t see a door behind it. He wandered back into the hallway slightly, and peered around the corner. Sure enough there was a hallway branching off which no doubt led to the side door. *That’s odd…no one posted there*, Chuckles thought, but shook it off, thinking that there was probably a guard around the next bend. Chuckles was actually supposed to be with the other group of agents, but he slipped away as they all headed up to the stage, thinking that there should at least be someone guarding the rear exit. The President had begun to speak, and Chuckles moved back towards the curtain, but hung back near that branching hallway, just in case.

"Good Evening ladies and gentlemen of the press, and families around the world." The President said in a calm, even tone. His hands were both on the podium, and no papers were arranged in front of him. A teleprompter screen sat in front of him, just beyond the cameras, so that he could read his officially prepared speech and not shift his eyes. "I come into your living rooms tonight with news that could change the face of global conflict as we know it." He cocked his head slightly and paused to let his words take effect. He spoke for several minutes, replaying current events, discussing present and past conflicts that had rocked the world. Expertly setting the stage for the full impact of what he was going to say. After a short while, he got into the meat of his speech.

"I do not want to mince words…I don’t want to beat around the bush. There is a specific reason for this address tonight. I’m not here merely to entertain you with my vast knowledge of world politics." Snickers rippled through the local folks sitting in the bleachers. The President smiled. "So without further ado, men and women of America, I present to you, the W-769. The Frequency Wave Bomb." He gestured slightly and an easel, which had been brought closer before the cameras started rolling, was uncovered, revealing a picture of the device. A gray, cylindrical object, no different in appearance to any other smart bomb, with the exception of a multitude of tiny satellite dishes plastered around the center of it. "Now, I’m getting right to business tonight because I want you, the American public to know just what a breakthrough this is. We’ve only got an hour slot on the networks tonight, so I have to be quick and to the point." The audience laughed mildly at the joke, a collective chuckle going through the lecture hall. "We all know that our history has been defined by conflict." His eyes narrowed as he squinted at the camera, trying to turn deadly serious after even the most timid of joke. "The history of our nation and the history of our world. Just imagine for a second, that throughout these millennia of war torn history if the toll of human life could be cut in half. Or more. Would that be a project that you considered worthwhile?" It was a rhetorical question, but several of the reporters, audience, and even cameramen nodded their heads approvingly. The President even figured that some of the audience at home was doing the same. He smiled broadly, a satisfied smile that told him that he had these people in the palm of his hand. It was a good feeling. One that he would miss after the coming months had passed. "This new weapon is quite revolutionary. It uses high pitched frequency waves, which, when set to the right channel will dismantle any weapon, machine, or building."

Rumbles and frantic conversation rippled through the audience like a wave. The President stood above them, on the slightly raised stage, smiling broadly. In the wings, the speechwriter shook her head, upset that he wasn’t sticking with the written material. She knew he was excited about the project, but they had agreed to a little more build up and a better presentation. As a public speaker this president could have used some work, and it was a good thing he had someone to write speeches for him. When he didn’t follow the program, sometimes things went badly.

"Imagine, if you will," The President started speaking again, "a battle to destroy a bunker in the center of a neutral village. A smart bomb could do the job, but at what cost? How many civilian buildings could possibly be destroyed along with the bunker? How many civilian lives lost when the bunker explodes, showering the village with debris and shrapnel? The W-769 will end all of that." He smiled again and stepped back just a little, taking in the welcome attention. "This weapon would be guided the same as a smart bomb, only instead of exploding, it will emit a high frequency wave, which will affect only the targeted building, causing it to literally shake apart, crumble, and finally disintegrate instead of exploding. Some lives, of course, would be lost, but a great many less than with a conventional weapon." He cleared his throat, a serious look on his face. "Imagine if the war in Vietnam had been fought with this weapon. Carpet bombing with a W-769 would have merely destroyed all weapons held by the enemy, severely reducing the number of American and Vietcong losses. Is that a weapon that would be worthwhile?" The President repeated the question again, only to please himself with the series of nods coming from the audience again. "As I speak, finishing touches are being put on the initial production run of the weapon, and we hope to have it in wide availability to all NATO allies within a year. A demonstration is being shown this Sunday to a select few, by invitation only. It will be recorded for mass audience viewing at a later date. Now…are there any questions?" The President blinked as the teleprompter operator struggled to catch up with him, but finally did, putting up a screen that gave him all the acceptable answers to any questions that might be asked. In the second row, hands shot up immediately, with desperate pleas of "Mr. President, Mr. President." He lifted a finger to point out a reporter, but didn’t get the chance.

"Yes, Mr. President, I have a question!" the voice practically shouted out to be heard, in one of the last rows filled. A young chiseled man stood swiftly. He wore a deep red suit with blue pinstripes, and fit the image of Ivy League to a T.

"Mr. Broca!" another man shouted, angered. The President recognized him as a political science instructor at the college. The young man was obviously his student.

"Relax, Professor Carson. Let the young man speak," The President said. *That little punk is damn lucky we’re live to the world,* he thought, but his expression did not give away his feelings.

The young student contorted his face into an angry scowl. He looked common, nondescript, with short blonde hair, blue eyes and a solid chin. One of the millions. "Mr. President, my question is this: Is it just a coincidence that this new invention is now available, just days before the Super Tuesday electoral vote? I doubt your good intentions, sir."

The President smiled, somewhat sarcastically. "Now, my good man…"

"Isn’t this whole proceeding just a thinly veiled election commercial for your Vice President?"

"Young ma…"

Don’t you think that’s what’s wrong with our country today? Politics and democratic nonsense ruining the country and the world?" Secret Service agents were now getting slightly nervous, and began inching towards the young man. The President motioned slightly for them to stand down. This was live TV, after all.

"I think you’re looking at things a little negatively, son."

"Don’t you think the world would do better underneath the leadership of one man?"

"Excuse me?" The President was quite confused.

"One organization, controlling everything?" the student’s arms pumped emphatically.

"No, I don’t. You’re not making much sense, young man."

The student was still standing, the agents ignoring their boss’ instructions and continuing their slow pursuit. "One man! One organization, coiled around the world…like a giant…" the student’s whole body tensed as he lifted his arm slightly, and the agents moved immediately.

"--COBRA!!!" the student screamed the last word and whipped his arm forward, a small object spiraling through the air from his open hand. Secret Service agents were on him in a flash, leaping over rows of seats and tackling him roughly to the ground. At the podium, The President stood, his eyes wide and his jaw gaping as the green object turned end over end, almost moving in slow motion towards the stage.

"Grenade!" it was Agent Rooks who shouted from the wings, and the agents were immediately in action. "Human shield! Now!" The entire group of agents lunged, and wrapped themselves around The President. Agent Biggs broke off from the group and leaped into the air, trying desperately to intercept the hurling object. He hit the object and pinned it quickly to the floor in front of the stage, just next to the row of cameras. Screams echoed throughout the lecture hall, reporters, cameramen and others scrambling for the exits. Commotion and confusion tore apart the professional air of the address and reduced it to total chaos. Biggs lay on his stomach, smothering the object, his eyes tightly closed and his muscles tensed, expecting a quick trip to oblivion. Several seconds passed and the agent slowly lifted up his head, his eyes glancing down in nervous anticipation. His stomach muscles twitched slightly, trying to decipher exactly what he was lying on. It folded in slightly with a strange crunch. Biggs drew in an anxious breath as he rolled over, looking nervously down at the object on the floor. He was smothering a plastic soda bottle, a wrinkled and torn Sprite label wrapped around it. Shaking his head in anger, he stood, and began to turn to chew out Rooks, whose eyes were obviously playing tricks on him. The crowd settled slightly as he stood, happy that no loud bang was currently blasting through the hall. Everything was still flowing in slow motion, and in utter silence.

*POW!*

*POW!*

*POW!*

And then the real chaos began.

As soon as he heard the raised voice, Chuckles moved forward, towards the rear of the stage. He was still too far away to hear what was being said, even when the kid shouted at the end of his apparent speech, Chuckles still couldn’t quite make it out. Then, there it was. Spiraling through the air, catching the light just right as it arced over the cameras towards the podium. Chuckles heart raced, but his eyes quickly focused and revealed it to be a harmless soda bottle. He was instantly confused even as the agents in the hall tackled the kid and wrapped him up in handcuffs. *Why?* Chuckles wondered to himself. *Why would a kid risk jail for a soda bottle prank?* Rooks voice shook him out of his thoughts. The frantic shouting of warning. *Rooks is closer than I am!* Chuckles mind was racing again. *He must know it’s not a grenade.* But still, Biggs launched himself into the air and smothered a soda bottle, protecting his president from certain carbonation. Chuckles lowered his head and shook it slowly from side to side. *Oh, man,* he thought, *this is going to be all over the news tonight.* He grinned and laughed softly. He was mildly amused about the whole predicament.

*POW!*

*POW!*

*POW!*

Chuckles’head shot up and back as if struck from a physical force. *Gunshots! I only lowered my head for a second!* He charged forward, his eyes taking in the scene in front of him. His mind raced, but his voice could only formulate one thing.

"Oh, no…"

Stalker leaned back in the swivel chair, glancing briefly at the Iron Man on his right wrist. It was about ten past six, Pacific Standard Time, of course and his stomach grumbled like an angry dog.

"Almost dinnertime, eh, kid?" he asked his fellow guard who was hunched over the screen as if caring for an ill child.

"Yeah, I guess so. We get relieved at eighteen thirty. Can you hold out till then?" he asked, somewhat jokingly. The kid was getting a little braver around the Army Ranger, but was still intimidated by him. Stalker chuckled lightly at the joke.

"Burns, I’ve lived for a week in the bush eating snakes and bugs. I sure as hell can wait twenty minutes for government chow!" He leaned forward in the chair, and gazed at the monitors in front of him, still not fully comprehending what he was supposed to be watching for. *Guess that’s what the kid’s here for,* he thought and shook his head slightly. *Dang, I’m gettin’ old!* He crossed his arms and sat back comfortably, waiting for the time to slip away. The middle door ahead suddenly slid open with a hiss and three men in fatigues with M-16’s slung over their shoulder came running in, each one’s face contorted in anguish. Stalker’s heart skipped. The door slid shut behind them as they approached the two men, all still looking distraught. Stalker jumped to his feet.

"What’s going on? Guard relief isn’t for another—"

"It’s The President," the first guard said softly. Stalker was taken aback.

"What? What are you talking about?" He approached the three men slowly.

"Burns!" shouted the man on the left. "Turn on the TV!" he pointed to a monitor firmly set into the corner of the room, just above and to the right of the right hand door.

"Something happened to The President." The middle man reiterated. Burns lifted a small remote and clicked the button, the TV blinking to life, already set to CNN. The talking head on the screen looked grim and serious.

"—still no information coming out of Washington, and all reporters have been sequestered at the site. As we get more information, we will bring it you, the American Public. Rumors already flourish on internet web sites and underground publications are already preparing headlines for tomorrow, which is sure to be a big news day." The five men stood stock still glued to the television set, their eyes not closing, their mouths hanging sloppily open. "For those of you just joining us," the newsman continued, "there were shots fired as The President gave his national address from a small New England town. We have lost all contact with our camera crews and reporters, and quite frankly, this reporter fears the worst. We now turn you to Fox Vincent, our on the spot cameraman who is situated outside of the lecture hall. Fox, what do you—" Without warning the television set blinked, the screen shuddered, then went blank. Stalker whipped his head around as every light and monitor in the large room hummed lowly, then plunged into blackness.

"What the--?" Burns asked, turning. With a shattering crash and tinkle the two large windows on the far wall blew in as if torn from their foundation by the winds of a hurricane. Shards of glass and even chunks of concrete sprayed into the dark room in a broad arc, raining down on the metal floor and the five men. Stalker lifted his arm as an automatic response, and felt tiny bits of glass sprinkle across it. The low light of dusk shone through the gaping holes that were once windows, and for a split second, Stalker didn’t know what to make of it. As soon as the figures swung down on rappelling wire, he was no longer confused. He’d seen the uniforms enough times to know exactly what he was dealing with.

"Everyone, grab some cover!" he shouted, and hit the ground himself, reaching into his hip holster and pulling out his Colt. He scrambled to the bank of monitors he was guarding, and pressed his back up against it, looking around over his shoulder and trying to get a rough count as the soldiers plummeted through the windows on swift zip-lines. Burns dove clumsily to the ground as well, hugging the bank of monitors for dear life. The other three guards scrambled for cover, one of them joining Burns, and the other two crouching down next to Stalker. Thin, faint red lines pierced the dim light of the room, waving back and forth, searching for victims.

"Did you get a count?" one of the guards asked Stalker as he crouched there.

"Roughly. Tough to count in a dark room…think there was eight, but I’m not sure. I was too busy hugging floor."

"The backup generator will kick in shortly. What do they want?" he asked Stalker again.

"I can only guess, bud. But, be careful here, okay? I’ve dealt with these guys before." Stalker frowned as he said it. As soon as he saw the first familiar dark green and black uniform, he knew it was trouble. Night-Vipers were nasty enough, but in a dark room, with him the only seasoned soldier their chances were not good. The backup generator kicked in with a soft whine, dull light bulbs flickering on scattered throughout the ceiling. They bathed the large room in an ominous red light, and Stalker wasn’t actually sure if it helped, or just made things spookier. He glanced over to his left at Burns, the young kid and sighed. He was cowering in fear, sweating heavily, and refused to take the weapon that the other soldier that joined him was offering.

"Kid!" he shouted in a hoarse whisper. "Stay cool! Don’t worry."

Burns nodded his head nervously.

"All right!" the voice boomed through the red, hazy air, and Stalker whipped his head around, trying to peek around the edge of the computer banks. It was a tall man with a dark blue vest, ammo clips all over it. He wore gray and black tiger stripe camouflaged pants an Ingram Mac-10 clutched tightly in one fist. His face was uncovered unlike the Night-Vipers, but definitely had a commanding presence about him. "This facility has been taken by Cobra! Stand up slowly and relinquish your weapons. There is no need for bloodshed!" He tried not to smirk as he said it, and was mostly successful. The Night-Vipers walked slowly through the red, misty room, their image intensifiers trying to compensate for the new light source. Aleph paced impatiently back and forth, squinting through the dim light in the room. Time was of the essence. "I don’t hear anyone surrendering!" he shouted, and lifted his machine pistol. Stalker drew in a breath, and cocked his pistol. He threw himself to the left, hitting the floor and rolling, keeping his weapon trained in front of him. With a shout he squeezed off four shots, the pistol thrashing in his tight grip. The weapon maintained its posture even as the flashes exploded from the barrel and the steaming spent shell casings bounced across the metal floor. The gunshots echoed in the room, and each muzzle flash lit the area for a split second. Aleph snarled and sidestepped quickly then darted back the other way. A Night-Viper behind him shouted in pain and stumbled backwards, chunks of green flying from his uniform as he fell under the wrath of the bullets. Stalker’s eyes grew wide.

"Did he just…dodge those bullets?" one of the guards asked, in shock.

"No…my aim was off," Stalker growled, pulling himself quickly back behind the monitors. Stalker shook his head. Only a couple people he knew could move like that and they were all ninja masters. *Who the heck is this guy?* Stalker thought to himself. The guy hadn’t exactly dodged the bullets, he just anticipated where Stalker was going to fire, and moved the other way.

"That didn’t sound like a surrender!" Aleph shouted angrily. "Night-Vipers! Eliminate—"

"No!" Burns jumped up from behind the computers, his arms flailing. The guard behind him reached up to hold him back, but the kid was too quick. "What do you want?" he asked anxiously, stumbling forward from behind the computers.

"Ah…there is a smart one here," Aleph said, smiling. Burns walked closer to him, nervous, but persistent.

"Kid! Don’t do it!" Stalker shouted, but in vain. Burns continued walking until he was just in front of the tall dark hared man.

"That’s a good lad," Aleph said, patting Burns lightly on the shoulder. "All we want is the conductors, my good boy."

Burns sighed in relief. "That’s all?" He turned and pointed to the left-hand door, situated against the far wall.

"Excellent. And the access code?" Aleph asked simply, noticing the small keypad just to the right of the door.

"I…I don’t know the access code, but—"

Aleph grimaced. "Then what good are you to me?" He lifted the weapon and pointed it directly at the young man’s face.

"Wait! I can help…I’ll figure it—" The silenced thuds of automatic gunfire interrupted him as Aleph blasted half a clip of nine millimeter into his face at point blank range. Burns stumbled back clumsily, then just slumped to the floor like a bag of rocks. Stalker’s eyes squinted tight, his hands squeezing almost painfully at his sides. He whipped to his left and yanked an M-16 from one of the guards that crouched next to him. He leapt to his feet, screaming in anger and training the assault rifle on the nearest group of Night-Vipers. With a violent jerking motion he let loose a blast of gunfire, the shots ringing in his ears and the flashes from the barrel illuminating everything within ten feet. There was a group of three Night-Vipers about twelve feet away, and the blasts tore through them with aggressive certainty as they collapsed roughly under the hail of gunfire. Stalker turned and aimed the rifle at Aleph, his eyes burning deep into the man in blue. Aleph’s eyes opened slightly in surprise. Another group of Night-Vipers opened fire quite suddenly from Aleph’s rear. Bullets slammed into the bank of computers and ricocheted off the metal walls in little shrieks, but Stalker did not move.

"Get down!" shouted one of the guards, and reached up, grabbing Stalker’s belt. Stalker stumbled back as another bunch of slugs hurtled at him, his assault rifle still roaring angrily. He whipped back as a bullet pounded into his shoulder in a crimson splash. With a thud, he hit the ground back first, his M-16 empty and smoke spiraling slowly from the round barrel. He clutched the wound, which was in the meaty part of his upper shoulder, just under the ball and socket. It throbbed with every beat of his heart, thick blood oozing through the green cloth uniform.

"C’mon, man! You’re no good to us dead," the guard chastised.

"Relax. I don’t…unh…lose my cool." Stalker said, struggling to sit up, his hand clutched painfully tight to the messy, but relatively harmless wound. "I just had the leader in my sights. With these guys, if you take out the leader, the rest of the group is pretty much helpless. I was just trying to help us out."

"How many did you take out?" a guard asked.

"Three more. Plus the one I nailed earlier, we just cut their force down to half. We’ve actually got the advantage of cover. There’s no reason why we can’t hold these goons off. What about backup? Anyone else in this dang base?"

"No one but scientists and lab techs. There wasn’t supposed to be anything here."

"Yeah, well, there is. And it’s up to us to keep it here. You got any more clips?"

The weaponless guard nodded and plucked some ammo from pouches in his uniform then handed them over to the dark skinned Joe. Stalker relinquished his sidearm to the guard and thanked him for the rifle.

"Hey, from the looks of it, you can use it a lot better than I can, man."

Stalker slammed a clip into the weapon and cocked it with one swift motion. His shoulder throbbed, but with a grimace he shut out the pain.

"Come now…do you really think you can hold us off? We have greater numbers and more powerful weaponry. Do the sensible thing!" As Aleph spoke he used silent signals to tell the remaining half dozen Night-Vipers to circle around the computer banks in a flanking maneuver.

"All right, guys." Stalker said to the two guards that stood with him. "We’ve gotta keep them from that door. I want you guys to run over there and join your buddy behind the other computers. I’ll cover you." His arm was a deep crimson mess, but he didn’t have the luxury of time to properly dress the wound. The two guards nodded and lifted their weapons. Stalker gave them the signal and they darted. Stalker stood up and aimed his weapon, only to find that the enemies had spread out into two distinct groups, each one approaching their cover.

"Dang!" he shouted angrily. He spun to the right, holding the M-16 in his good hand, leaving his left arm dangling to the side like a slab of meat. The blood was now coagulating and somewhat solidified and formed a deep almost brown stain on his camouflaged arm. His right arm buckled under the frantic bucking of the assault rifle as he struggled to keep the path of gunfire straight with one arm. One Night-Viper on the other side of the room flew off his feet and slid onto the metal floor, little streaks of red following his path, but Stalker was forced to take cover as the group of Night-Vipers closest to him unloaded with their weapons. He looked forward and relaxed when he saw the first guard, the one with his pistol, slide to safety behind the computers. Suddenly, though, a Night-Viper charged and blasted away with his submachine gun, hitting the second running man directly in the chest. His momentum reversed unexpectedly and his feet whipped out from under him as his upper body was halted with the force of the impact. He sprawled out back first on the metal floor and lay still, his M-16 spinning away across the metal floor. Stalker cursed to himself. He pressed his back up against the banks again and tore a shred of uniform from his right sleeve. The wound was now pounding with dull agony and the blood was flowing slowly again. Stalker wrapped the fabric around the wound, then pulled it tight with his teeth, grimacing in pain as he did. His fingers went slightly numb, but the blood flow had been stopped momentarily anyway.

"Keep it up! We’ll get what we want whether you’re alive or dead!" Aleph glanced at his watch again. This was taking far too long.

"Keep it up, Smiley! We’ve got plenty of ammo, don’t worry—" a sudden, violent explosion from the back wall interrupted Stalker. He inhaled sharply and ducked his head as concrete chunks and metal shards spun through the air haphazardly, chased by wisps of smoke and spurts of flame. He dropped and rolled to his right, peering out from behind his cover. The Night-Vipers had pulled back and rejoined their leader, forming a wall of sorts in front of the gaping hole that had just been made in the wall. The dim light of dusk shone through the jagged makeshift window as the two figures emerged into the foggy, red-lit room. The red bulbs shone mysteriously over the chrome head of the first man as Destro entered the mini war zone. He wore his silver helmet of old with his familiar regal leather uniform and high-necked red fur-lined collar. A red cape was draped over his shoulders and dragged softly on the crushed rock and pebbles that crunched beneath his shiny, black boots. Small bits of mortar on cement dropped from the edges of the hole and plunked softly off of his mask and broad shoulders. Stalker noticed a thin trail of smoke coming from his right wrist, and immediately saw the vacant spot where a wrist-rocket had sat. The Baroness strode in proudly just behind her man, clad in her familiar black leather, with a sneering red Cobra sigil displayed on her chest. Her jet-black hair fell just below her shoulders, and her green eyes squinted from behind the round glasses. She didn’t appear to have aged a bit, although it had been over five years since Stalker saw her last. The two walked forward, the human wall parting like the Red Sea and allowing them to pass through.

"Bad move, Chrome Dome," Stalker whispered to himself and lifted the rifle slowly. Destro spun almost gracefully and launched an object from his left wrist that Stalker only could guess at. He jumped back as the red grenade struck the computer bank and exploded loudly and harshly. Stalker was thrown through the air and tumbled roughly to the hard floor amidst a shower of microchips, monitor glass, and electrical components. He hit headfirst and rolled none too gracefully, sliding slightly, then laying still. Through the fuzzy haze of his vision he saw the other two guards jump to their feet, weapons blazing. A thin red streak erupted from the large man in black’s arm and hit their collection of monitors, but had a much more drastic effect than the grenade. The computers were annihilated and a huge orange ball of fire as the guards were torn viciously apart by the explosion and deadly shrapnel. The figures disappeared in the bright blast, and when the light faded and the smoke settled in, they were nothing more than battered rag dolls, bent and twisted on the cold floor. Stalker shook his head sadly as unconsciousness draped over him like a warm blanket.

"I was getting concerned, Aleph," Destro muttered as he continued to walk. "You were taking quite a while."

"You had nothing to worry about, Destro," Aleph said harshly, stepping up to the larger man’s side. The Baroness matched strides on Destro’s other side. "The conductors are in there," Aleph said, pointing to the door on the left. "But there is an access—"

Destro huffed as he walked and let loose his last wrist fired grenade. It clanged on the metal floor and rolled to a stop just in front of the door. The three continued their quick pace as the explosion ripped through the hazy air and shredded the metal door like so much tin foil.

"Night-Viper," Destro commanded, turning to one of the soldiers that had followed him in. Destro held out his hand and the Night-Viper produced a thick, metal briefcase. The large silver-masked man took it and entered the small room. He opened the case and carefully selected a number of small objects, studying each one with precision. He placed them all in the foam-padded case, a recessed compartment in the foam for each component that he picked up. Minutes later, he was done and they began the walk back towards the hole.

"Destro," Aleph said suddenly, pointing to Stalker. "That one…I think he’s still alive." Aleph lifted his Mac-10 and aimed, but Destro placed a firm grip on his forearm.

"We have what we came for. There is no need for more senseless bloodshed."

"But they saw us. They know who we are."

"They are local base guards, nothing more. I doubt they have even heard of Cobra, much less seen our faces before. Trust me, we have nothing to fear."

"As you wish," Aleph finally acquiesced and lowered his weapon.

"Contact the Desert Scorpions," Destro barked to one of the Night-Vipers who had joined them. "Have them break off into two groups. One to cover our escape and the other to get rid of these bodies." He motioned to the Night-Vipers strewn about on the floor. "The less evidence we leave, the better." The Night-Viper nodded affirmative as the group of victorious Cobras walked out into the night air.

# CHAPTER NINE

**DRASTIC MEASURES**

Chuckles’ heart was firmly lodged in the upper part of his throat and beating faster than a human heart is supposed to beat. Blood pumped like oil through his veins, his ears turning red, jaw clenched and hands pumping. He couldn’t even tell what was happening at the moment as a swarm of Secret Service piled around, blocking his view. He saw Rooks at the center of it all, head whipping back and forth, eyes scanning intently on every face in the room. There was the low rumble of shock and unbelieving conversation bellowing throughout the hall, and a thin haze of gray smoke still waved through the air where The President had just been standing. Everything was moving in slow motion to Chuckles, the frantic voices slurred and incomprehensible, the movements of the many figures frustratingly halted and with no purpose. He found his weapon drawn without remembering drawing it, and he was almost across the stage in two long strides. Rooks was shouting to every man in the immediate area. Chuckles saw him glare at the upper left-hand exit door of the hall, and he pointed there quickly. Chuckles squinted and focused in on the door, but he could see nothing of interest.

"All men, suspect sighted heading towards the East Wing! Repeat: the East Wing! All Agents, converge on the East Wing!" He was shouting into his microphone, and Chuckles could hear the booming voice in his earpiece as well as over the stage. The undercover Joe forced himself to relax and take in the situation in with a clear head. Obviously, there had been a sniper in the left doorway, which led to the East Wing. *Why didn’t anyone see him?* He thought to himself. He looked around, his eyes scanning the stage, looking for more solid clues. Half of the agents present in the room had dashed off to the door, but about half a dozen still surrounded the fallen President. An EMT crew was now rushing from the left-hand backstage area, a stretcher and other equipment in tow. The President’s crumpled mass was slightly visible surrounded by the large men in black, and a spreading pool of red pretty much confirmed Chuckle’s fears. It was a lot of blood, and appeared to be spreading out around his head. Not a good sign. The parquet floor was spotless besides and the tiny metal objects stood out like sore thumbs. Chuckles bent and inspected the tiny things as the florescent lights glistened off of their silvery, metal skin. Shell casings. Three of them, right there, behind The President. The acoustics of the lecture hall had made it impossible for Chuckles to determine the location of the shooter. He had believed Rooks when he spotted someone heading down the East Hall. But no one had headed down the East Hall. Rooks had been mistaken. As Chuckles stood, the corner of his eye locked onto another thing. The curtain, leading to stage right swayed ever so slightly. It was a small, short wiggle, barely any movement at all, but someone had run through there. And recently. Chuckles jumped to his feet to warn Rooks of his error in judgment, but decided against it, stopping himself before he spoke. The squad leader was still kneeling by The President, who was still surrounded by other agents, and now was hovered over by Emergency Medical Technicians. Instead, Chuckles broke off and dashed out through the side curtain, his nine-millimeter gripped like a lifeline. He hoped Rooks was as absorbed with the drama on stage as he appeared to be, and didn’t see him leave. Chuckles wasn’t sure why, but Rooks had suddenly been cast in a most questionable light. He burst through the curtain with unintended dramatics, his weapon poised out in front of him, one hand cradled by the other to steady the aim. The long hallway was silent and empty, the red carpeting bare and undamaged. Chuckles lowered his pistol and stared down the hallway curiously. The shooting had only happened minutes ago. If the suspect was running down this hall, Chuckles had a good chance to catch up to him. If he were off in some other part of the building, then this chase down the hall would be a waste of time and could allow the man to escape. Like any good cop or soldier, Chuckles strongly believed in the theory of gut instinct. He’d seen it solve many a case and save many a life. His gut said to run down the hallway, so he drew in a breath to steady the nerves and bolted. His legs pumped with the trained physicality of a marathon runner, although his breath was much shorter, and his heart raced much faster, even threatening to blast from his chest as he reached twenty yards. Although, that was more due to the tenseness of the moment and less due to Chuckles’ physical condition. Chuckles tried to remember back to the briefing session with the building blueprints and descriptions of whom was posted where. In his mind he visualized this hallway, a long hallway with many turns on the west side of the lecture hall, leading to the parking garage underneath the neighboring Inn. Chuckles was quite suddenly certain that this was where the suspect was headed. He picked up his pace as he approached a right turn, dashing by other lecture rooms, classrooms, and professor’s offices. Chuckles recalled that there were about five agents posted at the entrance to the parking garage, so he was somewhat reassured, although Rooks bizarre behavior still weighed heavy on his mind. *What if he rerouted all security? The parking garage could be empty right now with a clear exit to freedom.* Chuckles didn’t like that thought even as it was processing, and struggled to pick up the pace. There were only a few more bends, then the garage would be within his reach. As he ran, he suddenly remembered something, and had to fight the urge to slap himself in the forehead for his own stupidity. The communicator in his ear. It tuned to a special channel that only the Joes could hear. *Law!* The undercover agent pulled his microphone from the collar of his suit coat and spoke frantically.

"Agent One to Agent Two…Agent One to Agent Two…Law, do you read me?" Chuckles barked frantically into the mouthpiece.

"Chuckles? This is Law, my man…where the heck are you?" Law’s voice was a hushed, excited whisper.

"I am in pursuit…of the suspect! Down the…west hallway, leading to the parking…garage! I need backup, man!" Chuckles spoke hurriedly through exploding bursts of air from his lungs, which struggled just to keep up with the sprinting.

"What? Rooks has been in constant contact. The suspect’s in the East Wing. Says he’s holed up in the cafeteria. We’re all heading there now."

"Law, listen! Something…something’s not right with Rooks! I…was right…there when it hap—happened. Don’t leave me hanging, Law!" Chuckles could barely speak, his breath almost gone from the running alone. He could see the door leading to the garage just ahead, the dark void behind showing through the small, square window. Law seemed to be considering his options.

"No worries, Hombre. I’ll be right there!" the line clicked dead, and Chuckles was slightly reassured. But he remembered the blueprints. The cafeteria was on the far *east* side of the large complex. Exactly opposite of the garage. Coincidence? *My ass, it’s a coincidence!* Chuckles slowed to a jog, then halted by the metal door, his breath shooting in rapid gasps. He looked through the window, and sure enough there was no security in sight. Lots of cars littered the garage, most of which were Government Issue. The whole block had been sequestered and The President and his staff took up the whole inn next door. Chuckles looked at his watch, trying to make a guess about when Law might arrive. *It could take him as long as five or ten minutes, depending on whom he runs into*, was Chuckles’ best guess. He didn’t have time to wait, and he knew it. With a short breath, he reached down and twisted the long, narrow knob, and it swung freely. The door was unlocked. He double checked his automatic for ammo and made sure his spare clips were accessible. Chuckles closed his eyes, lifted his gun with a slight bend in his arms and slammed into the metal door, shoulder first. The door swung wide and fast as Chuckles threw himself into the dark, concrete room. He spun skillfully and ended up in firing position with his pistol aimed into the garage, the exit ramp rising up into Main Street just behind and to his right. Several thick concrete pillars held up the sidewalk and buildings above, every wall also cement and the exit ramp plastered in the middle of the north wall with ten foot portions of concrete wall on each side. Chuckles’ trained eyes slowly scoped out the darkness, but revealed no signs and no movement. Slowly, he walked into the garage, turning at the waist, carefully judging each step and looking intently in between the numerous dark government sedans that occupied the area. He sniffed at the air lightly, but could smell no exhaust. If the suspect had escaped, he hadn’t driven away. The undercover man squinted, trying to get a clear view of the first row of cars, but they were about thirty feet away and he couldn’t quite see into them. Another row of cars sat behind them, with enough space to pull out and a wide path leading down the east side, left for a few yards, then out the exit, on to Main Street. *Certainly he wouldn’t WALK out, would he? Secret Service outside would be on him in seconds.* His mind raced, desperately trying to formulate some plan of action that the suspect might have taken, or that he might himself take. The garage was apparently a dead end. Chuckles began to lower his automatic when the engine roared to life, loud and long. It gunned suddenly and ferociously, a great metal beast awakened with a start from a quiet slumber. The engine noise rose to a pitch, whined piercingly, then dulled to a throbbing rumble. The headlights flashed on with the brightness of the sun against the dark background of the parking garage. Chuckles winced as if hit with a physical force, yellow light washing over him from the second car back and furthest on the left. He stepped back, but regained his balance and wrapped his hands together around the smooth handle of the pistol, holding it forward in a prefect shooter’s stance, one foot placed ahead of the other to steady the aim. The motor dipped to confirm the shifting to reverse and the sedan hurtled back quickly. The car stopped with a shuddering jolt and light squeal then lurched forward, rubber screeching and peeling from the tires, leaving dark patches on the pavement floor. With a skillful swerve, the car whipped around the similar sedan in front of it and bore down on the Joe, who still remained stock still in his stance. The light bathed the large man, as he stood with weapon drawn, his mouth a narrow snarl and his eyes two piercing slits boring into the very soul of the driver. He drew a breath and fired three quick, well-grouped shots into the driver’s side of the windshield. The pistol rocked in his tight fist, but the bullets hit their marks plowing into the safety glass with the force of three tiny freight trains. Gummy chunks of thick glass blasted into the air from the impact, which was not a crack, but merely a succession of rapid thumps barely audible underneath the nearly deafening echoes of gunfire in the tight confines of the parking garage. Three dents appeared in the windshield, but no holes, and only a minimal crack spread from the points of impact. The car continued its speedy forward progression, zooming towards the undercover agent. Chuckles cursed quietly and squeezed off four more shots, this group also well placed and slamming into the thick window right at the same level as the invisible driver’s head should be. The driver was now only a jagged silhouette behind the windshield, which was reminiscent of a torn, ravaged spider-web, each crack a long, winding strand. But still the windshield remained whole, no holes or easy entryways for wayward nine-millimeter slugs. The car didn’t even slow as the bullets struck, the driver evidently confident in the windshield’s bulletproof capabilities and determined to make an escape. The whole world suddenly shifted again to slow motion as the blue sedan plowed through the dark air of the dimly lit garage straight towards the Joe masquerading as a secret service agent. His broad shoulders tensed underneath the jet black suit coat, his white shirt underneath starting to soak with sweat from the activities of the evening. The dirty blonde Joe kept still in his firing stance, the four door hurtling closer still and the options zipped through his active mind like lightning-quick flash cards. Only these flash cards had no easy answer, and a wrong answer could mean the difference between life and death. Chuckles’ senses seemed heightened in the gray confines, his nostrils flooded with the putrid stench of exhaust and burning rubber. The large man choked down the urge to be sick, brought on by the smells or the situation; he was not sure which. Seconds crawled by like decades as the car pressed onward, treading dangerously close to the pistol wielding GI Joe undercover agent. The options continued their assault on Chuckles’ brain, and he settled on one with the dead certainty of a man’s last request. His brain fought the urge to run, dive for cover and throw himself from the path of the car. *Now is not the time for self-preservation!* His mind angrily barked at the unwilling extremities. Every muscle in his body tensed as the car approached him, now a mere ten feet away and gaining speed with no intention of stopping. But he maintained his firing stance. With angry determination he trained the pistol steadily on the windshield, his eyes following the long extension of the barrel and squinting just over the small triangle-shaped sight at the end. The aiming device was centered right in the center of where the driver’s shaded head was, just above the steering wheel, apparently ducking and glaring straight at the intended target. As the car hurled forward Chuckles snarled and yanked back on the trigger repeatedly, keeping the thrashing handgun directed in the precise spot on the driver’s side of the windshield. With more thuds and thumps, the window buckled in its frame and threatened to shatter inward, a hail of nine millimeter following it in to take out the hapless assassin contained therein. But it didn’t shatter or break, it held fast. *C’mon!* Chuckles pleaded. *Just a few more shots…*but the sedan was right on top of him, and he had run out of options. He sucked in a breath in nervous anticipation as he threw his large frame up into the air. He jumped higher than even he had expected and was practically launched into the cool March air that filtered into the garage from outside. *I made it!* His mind proudly exclaimed. *Now I’ve just got to—*the shattering pain in his right angle halted all thought processes. The car’s grill clipped his foot as he brought his knees up, desperately hoping to clear the hood and roll safely to the side, watching the car zip by. His Dukes Of Hazard dreams came slamming to a halt as the powerful impact completely wiped his momentum. The force of the grill threw his legs viciously backwards as he rose up through the air, and his body twisted awkwardly over the hood of the car. He came crashing suddenly down as his legs were blasted out from under him, his right hip striking the thick part of the Detroit iron hood, leaving a large round dent in the metal surface. He closed his eyes as his face was thrown forward with amazing force and plowed into the smashed windshield, his cheeks and flesh buckling under the abuse. Agony roared unhindered through his head and face as his cheekbone and jaw smashed underneath the red and split skin. The momentum would not stop there, though. The laws of physics unmercifully continued on, spinning his legs up and around in a bizarre contortionist somersault, his body twisting and thrashing out of his control. He winced in anticipation as his body flipped forward, slamming him down back first on the edge of the roof where it met with the windshield. He felt the wet snapping of his ribs as he twisted again, hitting the roof with his left side and denting it with his lower back. His feet pounded down on the roof as well, leaving small, circular dents in its thin blue metal. Chuckles tried feverishly to alter his trajectory, but his ravaged body refused to cooperate as he continued his forward momentum over the speeding automobile. As he hit the roof, he slid and rolled roughly along the metal surface, his arms and legs flailing as if boneless, and his body continually abused by the metal and plastic. With a grunt, Chuckles slipped off of the roof and down towards the trunk of the car. Amazingly, he regained his composure somewhat and dug his heels into the top of the trunk with strong determination. As the car whipped forward, he extended his legs like a spring and threw himself through the air behind the sedan. The concrete fast approached, but the undercover agent tucked his head and hit the ground shoulder first, already rolling with the skill of a gymnast, then rolled up onto one knee, completely shocking himself with this new found skill. Adrenaline and energy pumped powerfully though his veins, and forced the pain to halt its attack, if only for moments. Chuckles stared at the sedan as it sped away, it’s red taillights dimming as it approached the corner to turn and disappear into the night. His face was streaked with red, chips of safety glass embedded in his flesh, blood coursing over pale skin and through matted, dirty blonde hair.

"No..nobody…shoots The—The President on my…watch!" he mumbled through puffy, bloody lips. Before he even realized that his arms were extended in a skillful firing stance, he fired again and again and again, the loud barks of gunfire erupting throughout the dank air of the garage. Exhaust and gun smoke mixed in the air in a blue/gray swirl of noxious fumes as the yellow muzzle flashes illuminated the darkness. The shots were right on target and plowed into the rear right tire of the escaping sedan, blowing it out into shredded rubber and sending the metal hubcap spinning away over the rough concrete surface. The car lurched sickeningly to the right, and the driver tried to compensate, then lunged the other way. The brakes locked and the remaining three tires squealed harshly, then the car spun helplessly, flying past the left turn to heads towards freedom. With a massive crunch the car struck the cement wall, passenger-side first, tearing metal and shattering glass. Another tire blew, the windshield finally shattered inward and the car rocked slowly, smoke and exhaust billowing from end to end. Chuckles lowered his head and smiled to himself, then forced himself to stand and begin the long walk to the smashed car. The pure adrenaline was wearing thin already, and the agent’s walk soon became a lumbering, limping comedy act, desperately putting foot before foot, approaching the beaten and smashed sedan.

"Chuckles: One…stupid blue car: zero," Chuckles mumbled and laughed to himself as he stumbled towards the auto, his pistol slightly raised. He popped the clip out as he walked, barely even hearing the thin metal clunk as it struck the concrete floor. As an automatic reaction, he scooped another clip from his belt and slammed it home with a satisfying click. His suit jacket was torn and shredded, his blue and orange Hawaiian shirt showing underneath. Blood ran in streams down his now bare arm and over almost his entire face. His right eye was pretty much swollen shut from the impact with the windshield and he couldn’t honestly figure out how he possibly held onto the gun throughout the whole ordeal. It had happened quickly, a matter of seconds, but it seemed an eternity to Chuckles…one he would be paying for quite some time. He was quickly approaching the car, and slowly he felt the rush returning. His pain eased a little bit and his pace quickened ever so slightly. In seconds he was at the driver’s side door, the window cracked into a series of ragged shards, erasing any visibility to the interior of the car. *No way anybody’s walking from this wreck!* He thought to himself, but just to be safe, he raised his weapon as he hooked the fingers on his left hand around the door handle. With a quick jerk, he lifted the handle and swung the door at the same time, quickly bringing his hand back to support the firing hand, his finger nestled snugly next to the warm embrace of the trigger. The driver’s seat was empty. His head whipped around reflexively and caught a quick glimpse of the small figure before it struck at him. Before his body was even completely around, the pistol was launched from his hand by a quick and hard chop, the arm more like a blur than an actual part of the body. The pistol arced through the air, over the car and clattered against the cement wall, then fell with a clank on the hood of the wreck. Chuckles squinted at the small person in front of him dressed in the familiar white and black of a Secret Service agent. His eyes grew somewhat wide.

"You’re a chick--?"

"Arrogant pig!" she shouted even before Chuckles could finish the sentence. She swung her leg like a thick, oak staff and plowed it into Chuckles’ midsection, sending his ribs searing with pain, and blasting the last bit of breath he had from his lungs. He dropped to his knees, coughing and gagging, barely supporting himself with trembling, red-soaked arms.

"Heh!" the woman laughed. She wore the black suit coat and pants, everything right down to the shoes and belt buckle. A dark black mask now covered her head, with only a slit for the eyes and the bridge of her nose. She stood at merely five foot six, but to Chuckles she seemed ten feet tall as he kneeled before her, struggling to breathe. "I am impressed," she said simply, then lashed out with a wicked right fist, slamming it hard into Chuckles’ broad jaw. His head whipped and spattered droplets of red on the gray floor, and he stumbled down to one elbow. "Even after being struck by the car, you continue the fight. Very brave," she said and lashed out again, this time with her left. Chuckles was thrown the other direction, stumbling clumsily back and resting uncomfortably against the smashed car. "Stupid, but brave." She laughed again and threw her left leg out like a gunshot, slamming her instep against the exposed side of Chuckles’ face. His head spun and whacked against the metal of the car door, and his eyes rolled slightly. Foamy blood dribbled from the corner of his lips. "Your will was carrying you. Now, your will is gone." She whipped her right leg out and around in a powerful roundhouse. It connected with a dull thud against Chuckles’ skull and he was thrown to the concrete floor like a two hundred and twenty-pound bag of potatoes. He lay there sprawled on the concrete, not moving. "And now, my over ambitious friend," she said, pulling a long, thin stiletto from a strap around her left wrist. "It is time for you to die." She twirled the thin blade and held it firm, blade down, her arm cocked and ready to fire.

"FREEZE!" the shout was overly loud in the empty garage, but served its purpose, causing the young girl to whirl, startled by the unexpected voice. Law stood in the open doorway, his legs locked in a shooters stance. His arms extended straight out, seemingly connected at the nerves to the cold hard steel Desert Eagle he held in his tight grip. The black .45 caliber glistened under the dim florescent lights of the garage, standing stock still, merely an extension of the shooter. Law’s finger sat poised just on the trigger, still and motionless, but anticipating trouble. He glared down over the barrel at the young girl with knife in hand.

"Drop the blade! NOW!" he shouted harshly, mostly to judge the opponent’s reaction. To Law’s surprise, she wasn’t the least bit fazed. Her mask turned slightly upward, almost as if she was smiling. Law’s eyes darted nervously back and forth from the woman to his partner, splayed unnaturally on the ground.

"I said drop the blade! Step away from the vehicle!" he reiterated. "This isn’t a game, little girl! Don’t think for one minute that I won’t shoot you!" His body remained still as he spoke, the weapon pointed at the center of her mass. She casually tossed the knife to one side, sending it skidding across the floor. Then as if being applauded by a cheerful audience, she bowed deeply, her left arm pointed out to her side. Law squinted. Suddenly, she crouched low, anticipating the path of Law’s bullets, which came fast and furious. He fired three times as she ducked, tucking her knees deeply into her chest. Her chin was mere inches above the ground as the shots rocked the garage and jacketed lead pounded into the metal surface of the car just above and behind her. Her eyes glared intently at Law, looking for even the slightest movement. His eyes gave him away and when he repositioned his weapon to point downward, she launched herself up into the air. Bullets chewed apart the ground where she was standing, chunks of concrete and bits of plastic and glass shooting into the air like little geysers. The young girl seemed to hover in the air, then curled into a tight ball and back flipped smoothly, landing in a graceful crouch on the hood of the car. Law raised his pistol quickly, but suddenly she had her own firearm as a small .20 caliber handgun almost appeared out of nowhere. She fired the three bullets in the weapon sending Law diving for cover, the woman deadly accurate, even with a shoddy pistol. He hit the concrete stomach first and skidded slightly, then raised his own weapon and fired. With unbelievable grace, the young lady leapt sideways into the air, flipped like a trained gymnast and hit the concrete ground in a low crouch. Try as he might, Law just could not get a bead on the girl. As soon as she stood she was off like a shot dashing up the exit ramp, and into the cold night. Law cursed himself harshly and picked himself up off the ground. He lurched forward into a dead run, skillfully shoving another clip into the automatic pistol. With a skid, he halted by his fallen friend and kneeled over him.

"Chuckles. You all right?" he asked, placing a pair of fingers on his neck to make sure.

"F—fine…" he mumbled. "Just get the…the girl." His pupils were floating like small brown rafts on a white pond, but Law agreed reluctantly. He leaped to his feet and was instantly up the ramp and out onto the sidewalk in front of the hall. News vans and reporters cluttered the street, which was blocked off to regular people and all gaped in wonder as he emerged from the garage, weapon in hand. They descended on him like a flock of vultures on carrion, microphones held out at arm’s length.

"Where did she go?" He demanded loudly to the oncoming crowd. "WHERE DID SHE GO?" he screamed it this time, but the blank faces told the story. This time, the reporters halted, taken aback by the sudden ferocity. Law shook his head and spun around, looking for escape routes. Then he saw one. The ramp led up to the road, concrete walls rising about six feet on each side. The elegant inn next to the center was situated directly next door, it’s sprawling white balcony practically touching the right hand wall. He could almost see her leap from the wall to the porch and be gone without a single reporter even seeing her. That meant *Main Street!* Law’s mind barked. She’s on Main Street. He lunged to his left and ran legs pumping and his heart racing. He finally acknowledged the lack of security on the street and made a mental note to check out Agent Rooks. Something was definitely not as it seemed. He rounded the corner, cutting close to the white, wooden porch, the nicely furnished rocking chairs still and unmoving. He waved his weapon back and forth, his eyes narrowing to slits as he took in the environment around him. Another "barricade" of news vans sat just beyond Allen Street, about one hundred yards straight ahead. Wooden sawhorses cut off access, but as with the garage and as with the street out front, no Secret Service. The stores were all closed and the street was vacant, almost like a fictional ghost town from an old Hollywood western. Law halfway expected a tumbleweed to blow aimlessly across the paved road, but shook that thought from his mind, trying desperately to concentrate on the task at hand.

Whisper leaned back, pressing her back against the side of the building, willing herself to be invisible. She thought she had outrun the Secret Service Agent, and was pretty sure none of the newsmen had spotted her, but she wasn’t certain. Uncertainty was an annoyance to her and the worst part about every job was the waiting. The tall buildings surrounded her, casting ink black shadows over the alley where she stood. She was breathing somewhat shortly, more from exhilaration than from exhaustion. She prided herself on being in good shape. With a deep breath she peeked out around the edge of the building and quickly jerked her head back in. The agent was rounding the white inn and was slowly walking across the street. Whisper cursed and tried to think of a way out of this. The other Secret Service could only be detained so long, and if she was spotted it was pretty much all over. She had no issues with sacrificing her life for the Cobra cause, but did want to live to see the plan in all of its glory. She squinted down the alleyway, pretty much the only alley on this section of street. It ended in a tall, lumbering brick building, and offered no escape. There was not even a fire escape or any other way to climb to the roof. Even if she made it to the roof, soon the snipers would return, and then she would have nowhere to go. She was trapped. Weaponless and defenseless, deep in enemy territory. She shut her eyes and tried to think of a plan. Any plan at all, just something so that she could see this wonderful plot to its conclusion.

"Come with me if you want to live," the raspy voice echoed from seemingly nowhere.

"What?" she asked suddenly, glancing around. The man emerged from what seemed like total darkness, as if a black curtain spread slowly and let him out. Whisper recognized the familiar gray camouflage pattern instantly. "Firefly!"

The tall man nodded. "Your father sent me. Come." He extended his gloved hand, and Whisper took it without hesitation. "I have a Claw on the roof. It will take us to the rendezvous, but we have no time to waste!"

"But what about him?" she asked, thrusting her head back towards the man walking slowly across the street. Firefly merely smiled behind his mask. He clutched her tight and pressed a button his belt buckle. She noticed for the first time the backpack on his back with a thin, black zip-line leading up to the roof. With that button press they launched into the air, carried smoothly on the thin cord until they reached the safety of the gravel rooftops.

*Were those voices?* Law wondered as he approached the dark alley just a dozen feet in front of him. The shadows draped from building to building and the thin passage between them was drowned in blackness. But still, Law thought he heard hushed whispers emanating from the alley. He dashed quickly to the brick building and flattened up against it, cocking his gun arm back and to his side. He turned his head to face the entrance and slowly stepped towards the alley, shuffling silently, step by step. *Order, boy…I miss you, mutt!* He thought, longing for the friendly German Shepherd by his side. His elbow dangled almost dangerously by the edge of the building, the alley almost beckoning him. Just asking to be entered. He drew in a deep breath and whipped around the corner, his pistol baring down on the dark alleyway. The shadows played across the walls, creating shapes and shadows, but completely blocking the end of the alley. *Is this a dead end?* Law asked himself.

"Come out with your hands above your head!" he shouted suddenly, just in case. The dark alley remained still. Keeping the pistol trained and level he stepped slowly into the alleyway, his eyes squinting in the darkness. He was concentrating on the back wall so much he didn’t even feel the slight tug of the tripwire against his dirty black dress pants. The black alley erupted suddenly into a too-brilliant flash of orange and yellow light, sending Law stumbling. The explosion followed directly afterwards, a flare of yellow, a thunderous blast, and the force hurtling Law backwards like an old, mistreated doll. Huge, broken slabs of concrete and mortar blasted out into the darkness, smoke billowing and roaring through Main Street, sending reporters diving for cover and falling back in surprise. Law felt like he was suspended in midair, which was because he *was* suspended in midair, almost floating backwards, end over end. The flame, light and smoke washed over him and he could feel his skin beginning to blister as he struck Main Street hard on his back. He flipped over ungracefully and landed in a heap amidst a shower of flame, smoke and crumbling debris. Lifting his head he glared through a blood-red haze at the crushed building and the fire and smoke which now surrounded him.

"S…sorry, Chuckles…" he grunted through the pain, and then there was blackness.

# CHAPTER TEN

**Damage Control**

The street was bare, the houses dark and cars parked, nestled in their driveways and garages. Dawn was coming slowly, the sun a dim light bulb shining through an opaque curtain of gray clouds, being slowly pulled as if by string. A soft light bathed the pavement road leading to Fort Wadsworth, but the roads were silent, as well they should be at this early hour. Sawhorses barricaded off the entrance to the Chaplain’s Assistants Quarters and a chain link fence had been erected, surrounding the perimeter of the whole base. A chain closed the front gate, although telltale signs showed that it had been opened recently. The scattered buildings among the fort were boarded and quiet; a forgotten reminder of Defense Department budget cuts and the times of war slowly slipping from American consciousness. One building in the fort was a hub of activity this early Saturday morning, numerous green jeeps and personnel carriers haphazardly parked around the front entrance to the Motor Pool. A low light shined from the windows, no longer boarded, but with shades pulled down snug to the windowsill. It wasn’t an unusual sight, and even at this early hour would not be considered an odd occurrence, especially at a military installation, albeit a closed one. The inside of the main Motor Pool garage area had been converted into a makeshift meeting hall about a week earlier, and for the second time in less than seven days, was being used as such. Several buildings made up the Motor Pool, as was necessary to pull of the deception of the innocent looking Fort Wadsworth, which had been, for years, the top secret headquarters of the GI Joe team. The ground was still broken and uneven behind the garage, and surrounded by the small stucco buildings. Underneath that makeshift crater had been the GI Joe underground base, code-named The Pit. A Cobra attack had exposed the fort for what it was and driven the Joe team from their headquarters. They then became a nomadic unit for several years, until setting up another base in the desert of Utah. The attack had been a costly one, injuring several Joes and killing two members of Washington top brass, Admiral Dyson and General Ryan. A battle long ago, but not forgotten by Hawk as he strolled slowly across the little mounds of dirt and grass, his ankles turning slightly on the uneven ground. His eyes were little slits on his face, thick black circles prominent against the light, pale shade of his skin. His slightly graying blond hair was tussled and unkempt, and his dark green uniform rumpled and a little messy. He lowered himself into a crouch, scooping up a hard chunk of soil from the ground. The General remembered back to that fateful battle, one that he and General Hollingsworth had barely escaped with their lives. His face was worn, beaten and tired. He almost looked to have aged a year in one night. He dropped the pile of dirt and grass and stood slowly, scanning the all too familiar landscape.

"General?" the voice behind him was unmistakable, even when shrouded by lack of sleep and concern.

Hawk spoke without turning. "Yes, Duke?" his eyes were somewhat glistened over as he stood there in the quiet early morning, the events of the night, and even the events of the past decade finally taking their toll.

"Everyone’s accounted for. They’re waiting for you, sir."

Hawk looked down at his hand, a small rock left in it from the pile of soil. "When will it end, Duke?" Hawk asked rhetorically.

"End, sir?"

"This ridiculous conflict. For the past fifteen years."

"It doesn’t end, sir. It’s a soldier’s life."

Hawk slowly tossed the rock in his open hand, then caught it again. "I mean Cobra, Duke. I thought it was finally over. Everyone did. And then…then…*this.*" He motioned to the large American flag, which still swung from the tall white pole. It was lowered to half-mast, slowly rippling in the cool morning breeze. No other sound was audible except for the nearly silent whipping of the thick cloth in the wind. The morning was dead quiet.

"Don’t beat yourself up, sir. It’s not your fault."

"We hit them, they hit us. They hit us then we hit back. It goes on forever!" he caught the stone on its way down, and wrapped his fist tightly around it, his hand trembling slightly.

"General—"

"No more!" he shouted loudly in the early morning fog. His arm whipped out and he hurled the rock like a fastball pitcher. It smashed through an unboarded window on the nearest building, the glass shattering inward and falling with a light tinkling on the hard floors inside. Duke stepped back, but remained silent. "This is it, Duke. Whatever happens, it’s got to end." Hawk turned and glared straight into Duke’s eyes. Duke noticed that his eyes shined wet even in the dim light of dawn. Hawk swiftly regained his composure when he saw Duke’s look of mild concern. "Come on, First Sergeant. We’ve got an assault to coordinate."

Duke smiled slightly. "Yes, sir."

Inside the garage/meeting area, men wandered about restlessly, waiting for General Hawk and talking excitedly amongst themselves.

"Gung-Ho, my main man? How’s my favorite jarhead doin’?" Roadblock approached his equally large and equally bald comrade, and extended his hand. Gung-Ho smiled widely and wrapped his hand around the darker skinned hand of his fellow Joe.

"Roadblock! Any idea what’s shaking?" he asked jerking his head quickly towards the empty podium. They didn’t have much time for small talk. They had been training together for the past week, and had all pretty much caught up in that time.

"Probably something to do with last night. Pentagon brass has gotta be catchin’ flack." Gung-Ho nodded as a dark hared man approached a black bushy moustache just above his upper lip.

"Bazooka, how’s it going?" Roadblock asked.

"I’m good, Roadblock. How much sleep did YOU get last night?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. His familiar red and blue football jersey was somewhat wrinkled.

"’Bout as much as anybody in here. Any word about what this little meeting is for?" Roadblock ran a dark hand over the layered green shirt he wore, neatly tucked into his dark blue pants. He tugged nervously at the brown leather straps that ran over his shoulder. Everyone was fidgeting.

"Alpine thinks Cobra was involved with that whole thing last night. Me and Zap, though…we don’t think they’d do anything that high profile."

"Hey, you guys," Dial Tone asked eagerly as he approached the small group of Joes. He wore his usual black beret and jacket. Straps of grenades criss-crossed over his chest and the strange silver mechanisms were still evident throughout his uniform. His moustache was trimmed slightly, but still there, and was still jet-black. "Did you hear anything about the new guys?" he continued. He gestured over at the two men standing pretty much by themselves. A young man in a red, quilted shirt with machinery etched into the fabric was standing by himself about two feet back from the podium. He clutched a large, silver helmet in one hand, and looked around the room uncomfortably. About ten feet away, a much older man stood a black cap firmly over his head. He wore gray urban camouflage with a black flak jacket. He stood facing Shockwave and Low-Light, both dressed in their battle gear and they were talking friendly.

"Yeah," replied Gung-Ho. Today he wore his torn green camouflaged shirt and gray khakis. A thick cloth headband wrapped around his bald scalp. "Kid’s name is Blackout. Electronics expert. He’s a regular child prodigy, from what I hear. Smart as a whip, but untested on the battlefield. He’s got all sorts of nifty gadgets that would make geeks like you and Airtight jealous!"

Dial Tone glared, but couldn’t help but chuckle. "What about the other guy?" he asked. "He looks familiar."

Gung-Ho nodded. "Name’s Kevlar. Ex-Team Leader for S.W.A.T. Team One out of Los Angeles. Pretty famous for his team’s performance."

"Hmmm…" Roadblock muttered. "Not sure I like the idea of youngbloods being tested in the field. We’ll have to keep our eyes out."

"They wouldn’t be here if they couldn’t hack it," Bazooka said, remembering his training mission as a Joe. The B.A.T.s and Doctor Mindbender’s plant spores had pretty much ended the training. He was there with Airtight, Lady Jaye, Crankcase and Heavy Duty. Bazooka’s face suddenly turned deadly serious, thinking about his fallen comrades. Him and Airtight were the only ones left out of that group. He still had tough times dealing with it.

"What’s the matter with you, ‘Zooka?" Alpine asked, saddling up next to his long time buddy. He wrapped a large, dark arm around his friend’s shoulders and looked him in the eye from behind the wire frame goggles he wore. His green and black hat was dipped low over his eyes, but his constant smile, which turned up the edges of his moustache, almost brightened up the room.

"Just thinkin’ about our buddies. You know. The ones who couldn’t be here." His eyes lowered again and the mood in the small group shifted. A sudden murmur going through the crowd shook them out of their momentary funk and they turned to face to podium. Hawk was followed by Duke and approached the wooden stand, microphone standing proudly on top like a single, large birthday candle.

"A TEN-HUT!" Duke shouted and the whole room suddenly molded into a solid mass of soldiers, each one stock-still and standing straight.

"At ease," Hawk said quickly, glancing down at the podium. He struggled to contain himself. There was a blank white screen behind him and an old Army issue slide projector stood against the far wall. "Gentlemen, I will get right to the point. I’m sure you all know why you are here." He spoke with an unusually muffled voice, dulled by sadness and by lack of sleep. He and Duke were but a few of the many that had had a sleepless night the previous night. A very long, sleepless night. "At…" his voice cracked slightly. "Ahem…at approximately twenty-one ten last night, as I’m sure you all know, The President of the United States was assassinated in front of the entire country on live TV." He stopped speaking briefly and placed his fist to his mouth, then coughed quietly. The audience was still and quiet. "Damage control went strongly into effect at that point, but was unable to stop the reports from spreading. The world is quite aware that it happened, and it looks like it was an inside job. What the world is not aware of, however, is that the job was organized and pulled off by Cobra." He let the last sentence sink in and allowed the murmurs to resonate through the crowd before slowing and quieting to a trickle. "Mainframe, hit the lights, please." Hawk nodded to the back of the room and seconds later, it was plunged into darkness.

"Directly following the assassination, this was found on The President’s…on The President’s body." Hawk still had a hard time forming the words. The slide projector hummed to life and the first photo flashed onto the white screen. It was an evidence picture, that much was obvious. Words were scrawled in red across the white paper. The red was not ink. It appeared to be blood. The words written on it were simple ones but conveyed a deadly meaning.

*As swift and as silent*

*As a whisper on the wind*

*Those who oppose us*

*Shall meet their end.*

Underneath the short phrase, still written in blood, a sloppy Cobra symbol was drawn. It was messy, but the message was clear.

"Those of you who have been out of the loop for the past five years will be a little confused by this message," Hawk said simply. "But any of you who were in the Intelligence or Special Forces divisions will recognize this handiwork." Many of the men in the room mumbled questioningly, obviously confused by the statement. A handful of the men in the room, Falcon, Mainframe, Duke, Ripcord, and a few others stood still; their faces locked in a pensive gaze. "Whisper is an international terrorist and assassin for hire. This is the calling card he leaves after every hit. Mostly thought of as a legend, but now, is being taken deadly serious. If Cobra has enlisted the aid of the mysterious Whisper, then we have a fight on our hands." A scattering of hands shot up into the air. Hawk glanced at the first one he saw. "Yes, Bullhorn?"

"I thought this was an inside job, sir?"

Hawk cleared his throat and prepared to continue. "So it would appear. After the incident last night, four agents disappeared. All agents directly involved with The President’s protection that night. Two of them stand out. Agent Rooks and Agent Tolliver." The screen flashed to photos again and the agents’ faces glared out from the screen. The photo on the left was the old, grizzled visage of Team Leader Rooks. The one on the right was a young, striking blond. Her face innocent, yet stern. Young yet inexplicably seasoned. "Agent Rooks was the leader of the squad charged with protecting The President. Directly after the incident he flooded the East Wing with agents, immediately pulling every one of them from their designated positions and rerouting them to pursue the attacker." Hawk tapped the man’s face with his thin, metal pointer. "Only problem was, there was no attacker in the East Wing. He was running through the West Wing, on exactly the opposite side of the building. We had two men undercover, Chuckles and Law. They pursued the assailant into the parking garage and out into Main Street." Hawk paused momentarily. "We’re not exactly sure what happened from there, but both men are in critical condition at the Medical Center in a neighboring town. They are currently unavailable for questioning." Hawk lowered his head and cleared his throat again. "Chuckles has several broken ribs, a fractured ankle, cheekbone, jaw, and skull. His shoulder and right hip are dislocated, and he is not out of the woods. Law also has many broken or bruised ribs, a nasty concussion and second degree burns over a lot of his body. He is still unconscious and the prognosis is…" There was an audible pause in his speech, but Hawk forced himself to finish the sentence. "…not good." His head lowered slightly, then raised again when a soft cough caught his attention.

"Beachhead?" he asked, pointing to the man in the black vest and camouflaged pants who stood about twelve feet away, his arm extended.

"What are they going to do about those agents?" he asked.

"Well…the agents have already been…taken care of." Hawk’s eyes were stern and serious. "All four missing agents were found in their respective apartments with self-inflicted gunshot wounds to the head." The crowd practically erupted into hushed speech and frantic whispers.

"So they whacked The President, then themselves?" asked Hit & Run, confusion settling in on his face.

"No. The wounds were all about five days old. It would appear that the agents were eliminated, then a certain group of persons ‘borrowed’ their identities to pull of the mission. We believe Agent Tolliver is the killer, which conflicts with all known reports that Whisper is a man. She was the first one reported missing. So either Whisper enlisted in her aid for the killing, or she is in fact Whisper herself."

"So, what’s the plan, General?" asked Wild Bill in his distinctive Texan twang. He ran a finger across the wide brim of his cowboy hat.

"The GI Joe Team is going into full active duty as of now. Everyone is being given clearance to Level Six of the Pentagon where we will establish a momentary base of operations until a more permanent solution can be found. Other than that, we have to take a wait and see attitude."

"Do we know where Cobra is stationed?" Torpedo asked, his wide, Hawaiian features looking concerned.

"Negative. We sent a S.E.A.L. Team to investigate Cobra Island, but…we have heard nothing yet. However they do not report to me, so it is possible that I am just out of the loop." He finished the sentence in a low, grim voice. "But we are maintaining constant satellite surveillance and have, so far turned up nothing. Unfortunately, without solid evidence, no way is the D.O.D. going to greenlight an invasion force on an uninhabited island."

"W…with all due respect, sir?" a light voice echoed from the front of the audience. Hawk looked down at the young Asian man.

"Yes, Blackout?" he asked.

"If I could look at those satellite photos, that would be good. I have an imaging program that I came up with that rivals even those in Washington. I might be able to find something."

"No problem, son. Washington’s Pentagon is our Pentagon once we arrive there. Cobra seems to be taken a lot more seriously, now that they’ve done this. Any other questions?" he asked again. There were none. "All right, next stop is McGuire Air Force Base. There’s a C-130 waiting to transport us to the Capital. Everyone board up in the APCs outside and we’ll meet at McGuire!"

"YES, SIR!" was the unanimous, eager reply.

The blue/green ocean water churned and chopped on the surface of the Gulf of Mexico. The sun was peeking out over the pink clouds of early morning, and cast a luminescent orange haze over the thrashing waves. Just under the surface a maroon streak zipped through the rough waters like an arrow through whipped cream, barely even fazed by the liquid substance around it. It was a thin, narrow vehicle, very reminiscent of the Cobra Stellar Stiletto, the organizations experimental rocket. Cobra’s finances were not what they once were, so missions in space were out of the equation and most of the Stilettos were sold off for profit. Cobra Commander kept a few of them around and converted them into the new prototype Cobra MAKO. It was a small submersible vehicle, capable of holding two passengers and moving at incredible speeds throughout the ocean. It was modified to carry two sea to sea torpedoes as well as a group of four sea to air cruise missiles. Small twin cannons were set into the metal skin on either side of the sharp nose cone. It hurtled through the greenish liquid, unhindered and unimpeded by the crashing waves and the wild wind that came along with the month of March. Firefly manned the vehicle very carefully, making sure not to let even the slightest bit of it break the surface. It was daylight and the satellites had a perfect view of the island and its surrounding territory. He had no intention of blowing Cobra’s plan before it even got off the ground. Behind him Whisper was wedged into the rear seat, a small compartment barely large enough to fit even her small frame. The MAKO was primarily designed for a single pilot, but the second passenger could fit if necessary. It was not a comfortable ride, however.

"Hang on, Whisper," Firefly said his voice hushed and intense. They were the first words he had spoken the entire trip from the Eastern Seaboard. With a subtle twist of his wrists, the slick red vehicle hit a steep decline and plummeted deep into the ocean. Underwater was remarkably similar to outer space in many ways, one of which was the serious change in air pressure outside of the vehicle. The Stiletto had already been designed to compensate, so it’s shift in function to an underwater sub was not a long stretch. The underneath of Cobra Island soon came into view, a large jagged chunk of land mass extending down towards the ocean floor, further than either of them could see. It was quiet and serene down here. The only noise the swift howl of the MAKO piercing through the water. Fish darted in every direction to make a path, and Whisper even thought she saw a shark a few different times during the long trek. It could have been a lot longer, though. It helped that the MAKO was an incredibly aerodynamic and quick little vehicle. It was astonishingly simple to control as well, as this was the first time Firefly had piloted one. The learning curve was practically a flat line, but it was one of those things that were easy to learn, yet very hard to master. Hurtling in a straight line towards an established destination was one thing, controlling it in the middle of a firefight, dodging torpedoes and returning fire…Firefly figured that was something else entirely. Just ahead, the rocky underbelly of the large island grew closer and closer. Whisper’s eyes focused and refocused, trying to see what they were going to do. They appeared to be heading for a ragged wall of underwater rock. The Stiletto plowed onward through the ocean water, the liquid splitting around the speedy watercraft. Whisper’s hands clutched tight to the side of her seat as the island grew nearer still and Firefly showed no sign of stopping.

"Firefly?" she asked, somewhat nervously.

"Quiet. I have to be heading for just the right quadrant." Whisper fought the urge to close her eyes, as the dark mass of land was now only feet away. Just as the MAKO seemed like it was going to strike the rock and explode into pieces, burying its hapless passengers in an underwater grave, the rock face split open and the modified rocket zipped through the momentary open gap. The thick doors concealed by rock slammed shut behind them as they cruised onward, now in a narrow tunnel at a slight incline. It was obvious that this tunnel was constructed especially for this vehicle and that the driver could not be just anyone. Luckily, Firefly’s piloting over the night had sharpened his skills and he maintained a direct, straight heading, keeping the sub evenly spaced between the two smooth walls. The passage continued upwards at a slight angle, keeping fairly straight with no sudden turns. Suddenly, light bathed into the cockpit, a bright, artificially yellow light, which temporarily blinded the passengers. It didn’t matter, though as the thin red ship blasted through the surface of the calm ocean water, threatened to become airborne, then halted by the grip of the liquid it had tried to escape from. It appeared to pause in midair, and then plunged downward, striking the motionless water with a loud bang and huge splash. As the MAKO wobbled to a still position, the reinforced canopy flipped open with a click and the two operatives stepped out. Whisper recognized the place now. It was a branch of the motor pool, a large underground cavern that housed Cobra’s water vehicles. The cave seemed to spread for miles, Moray Hydrofoils, single manned Hydrosleds, and Piranhas dotting the landscape. Rows of florescent lights ran across the rocky ceiling of the cave, held together by thick titanium plates. They were in a still pool of water, obviously the entrance point for the MAKO, as there were two others parked on a dock, about twenty feet away. A metal platform slowly extended as if by magic from the metal floor, which acted as the docks for Cobra’s water arsenal. Once the floor started, there was a large, round room, computer banks and charts plastered against the far wall. A lone, winding staircase led up to the upper level, and a large cavernous passage ran from deep inside the island to the ocean outside. Whisper figured a secret door very similar to the one she had just witnessed must lead out to the Gulf. On the metal floor, Cobra Commander stood in his regal dress uniform, this one black instead of blue. A gold braid ran over his chest on this uniform, matching the colors of the tasseled shoulder pads, which sat on his broad shoulders. The Cobra symbol on this uniform was silver rather than red. This seemed to be an important occasion. The ever-present Snakebite flanked the Commander, and the two Immortals flanked him. Crimson Guard members stood at rigid attention, the Supreme squad leaders heading their respective groups. Tele-Vipers and Techno-Vipers manned the monitors and computer screens behind the collected officers and gray suited Eel underwater specialists scurried about, checking various equipment. Three of them bobbed up out of the water surrounding the sub, staring out from behind plexi-glass goggles. The tips of their spear guns jutted from the water ever so slightly, a mere precaution in case those entering were not friendly. The platform stopped extending with a solid clunk, mere feet from the edge of the MAKO. Several Eels collected on the ramp as the two emerged from the small cockpit. A new Cobra water trooper, code-named: Tigershark joined the Eels on the ramp. Tigershark was the MAKO operator and expert underwater combatant. There were five Tigersharks, one for each MAKO, and each one had to survive Eel training as well as Lamprey and Secto-Viper training. It was argued that the Tigersharks were the most highly skilled Cobra water operatives, yet piloted the most simple of Cobra watercraft. However, the MAKO was only simple on the exterior. To become an expert on the narrow underwater sub, your reflexes had to be incredible, your shooting skill amazing and your understanding of underwater physics like no others. The craft was fast and fussy. Anyone could drive it, but only the most highly trained operatives could use it in battle. The underwater troops quickly swarmed over the vehicle, Tigershark skillfully vaulting into the driver’s seat, flipping switches and adjusting toggles. The Eels combed the surface of it for any unwelcome devices or flaws with the design. Firefly walked confidently along the metal platform, which rested just on top of the smooth water’s surface. Whisper followed close behind, now in her full battle gear, blue and black fatigues and her black facemask. A strand of dark hair fell from underneath the mask and brushed over the smooth features of her pale face. She brushed it annoyingly aside and noticed for the first time that there was a dark red carpet leading from the edge of the docks to the far wall. She glanced into the crowd and quickly picked out Doctor Mindbender, Overlord, and Scrap Iron. Wild Weasel stood at attention on the Commander’s other side. The Cobra hierarchy was all here. Whisper had to fight the urge to blush. As soon as the two Cobras set foot on the metal dock, Cobra Commander’s voice boomed loud and large.

"Today begins a new dawn for the Cobra organization!" He threw his arms majestically into the air, his crimson cape flowing back over his shoulders and swaying lightly behind his back. The tassels on his shoulder pads shook almost comically. "Great Firefly! Whisper! They return from a mission most successful!" the crowd of officers roared their approval, a great burst of confident applause and shouts of congratulations. Whisper was immediately uncomfortable. She was raised in the shadows, and trained to stay there. *Is* *this presentation really necessary?* She wondered to herself, but kept her thoughts quiet. Cobra Commander turned to the officers, quickly joined by Firefly, who stood confidently next to him and Whisper, who shrunk down almost behind him, trying desperately to be out of sight. "My officers! You are the driving force behind Cobra! Without you, we would not exist. I promise the fruits of victory will be shared with all when the time comes! Your names will adorn the great monument to Cobra…a towering symbol devoted to this day. The first day of our rule!" His arms pumped and with every pump, burst of cheers echoed in the cave. His eyes were wild with passionate ambition behind the flowing black hood, his body chemistry animated and excited. Whisper could already see this enthusiasm rubbing off on the officers as they cheered and raised their arms in triumph. She was glad to be such an important part of the new rule. But had Destro succeeded? That was the important part. If Destro had succeeded, then the world indeed did belong to Cobra.

THE END

To Be Continued in Book Two: Counter Strike