

It had only taken Scribe a few minutes to figure out the easy-to-use interface on the PDU and get a map of the Pit with a route to Flint's office clearly highlighted on it, but it was a fairly long and twisting route and an elevator ride so he was running late. Running was an accurate description too, since he was sprinting through the barren, echoing corridors. Eventually though his destination came into sight, and he nearly tripped trying to come to a stop.

Taking a brief moment to try and catch his gasping breath he glanced at his watch. It had been fourteen minutes since Paycheck had left him, and he was officially late to his first meeting with his new XO¹. Swallowing hard he hesitantly knocked on the door.

"Come on in," a friendly voice called from inside.

Bracing himself for an expected chastising and still breathing heavily, Scribe opened the door and stepped through.

"Speciali...st, um, Scribe reporting, Sir," he said through his haggard breathing as he snapped to attention and offered a crisp salute in front of the other occupant's desk.

"Knock it off, Scribe. We told you that we don't do that here," Flint responded, ignoring the salute. "Have a seat....and why are you breathing so hard?"

"Sorry, Sir. I mean Flint," he muttered as he looked into the officer's face to verify that addressing him in such a manner was *really* okay. Seeing no rebuttal forthcoming he pressed on. "I was running to try and get here on time."

¹ Executive Officer

“What do you mean, on time? I told Paycheck to send you my way when he was done with you.” Flint leaned forward and crossed his arms on the desk in front of himself. “Let me guess. He told you we had a scheduled time for this?”

Scribe nodded, his breathing finally coming under control. “Yes, S....Flint.”

A knowing smile spread across the XO’s face. “I swear, one of these days I’ll hear that someone didn’t mess with a new recruit, and I’ll be absolutely floored. I imagine even Order gave you the business?”

“Yeah,” Scribe said, smiling slightly at the memory before realizing how he’d answered. Flint paid the casual response no attention though.

“No surprise there. Welcome to the Joes, I guess. You can probably expect that sort of thing for the next couple weeks at least. It seems like everyone around here has their own little way to break people in.”

As Scribe listened, he scanned the office he was sitting in. The walls were mostly barren and almost no personal items decorated the space. Every officer or NCO² whose office he’d ever been in was packed with framed pictures and awards, various trophies and keepsakes, and many other personal touches that this one was lacking. The only thing that indicated the space actually belonged to the man he was speaking to was a single framed document indicating Flint’s status as a Rhodes Scholar and a black beret hanging on an otherwise empty coat rack.

Noticing the survey Scribe was performing, Flint explained the situation without prompting. “I don’t really spend much time here, so no need to pack it full of stuff. Most of us Joes on the operations

² Non-Commissioned Officer

side are allergic to desks. We'd all rather be working on something in the Pit or out in the field. I'm only here because Hawk likes me to greet the new recruits and give you the welcome brief."

"Is all of the leadership on the operations side?" Scribe asked, interested in the preference for field work Flint had indicated.

"That we are. Everyone you met during your interview is from the operations side except for Psyche-Out. He's technically one of our few multi-role members, working on both the operational and support sides."

"Psyche-Out? That was the Lieutenant?"

"That's right. He's our psy-ops³ specialist and part of our mental health staff too. I'm sure you've got a ton of questions about this sort of thing, but let me give you the big picture first, ok?"

Scribe nodded, realizing that his natural curiosity had already started getting the better of him and that he'd been asking too many questions in this meeting instead of letting Flint take the lead. A few moments of silence stretched out as the XO made sure no more questions were forthcoming before he launched into a rehearsed sounding monologue.

"As of this morning you're a member of the G.I. Joe team," Flint began. "We're an anti-terrorism task force comprised of members from every branch of the military and various law enforcement agencies. This is an off the books operation, and your assignment here is classified. That's classified as need to know only, by the way, so someone just having a clearance won't cut it. That means that as far as your family and friends are concerned, you're still just part of the regular Army. As for need to know, we operate directly under the direction of the Executive Branch through the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Homeland Security, and Joint Chiefs. Certain members of their staffs are aware

³ Psychological Warfare Operations

of our existence and status, and that's about it. While you're a member here you'll receive normal military pay plus special status bonuses and regular promotions. We don't have uniform, hair, or facial hair standards, but you'll be expected to maintain your regular military uniforms and meet normal military standards of presentation if a mission requires it. Any questions so far?"

Only about a million of them, Scribe thought. For an answer though, he simply said "Yes, a few. How does being a secret unit work if we're still regular military?"

"We're all marbles in our own little shell games. The folks on our personnel team maintain various sets of nested orders for all of us and keep us hidden in a pile of paperwork. Technically every Joe still belongs to the unit they came from, but we're all so buried under short-term transfer and temporary duty assignments that eventually lead to dead-ends that nobody can figure out where we really are. I'll let them explain more once you get to talk to them, since getting to know everyone and how we do things around here will be a big part of your job. All you need to know for now is that you'll be getting a cover story sometime today to use when you talk to whoever you talk to."

The mention of people he spoke to suddenly clicked with Scribe, and he found himself blurting out "What about my blog?"

"You're free to keep doing what you've been doing with it, as long as you stick with the same sort of information. Don't mention anything about the Joes or your involvement with us and there won't be any problems. Oh, and just so we're clear our computer ops people will be watching what you post pretty closely, just in case you slip up."

"I understand," Scribe reassured the other man, wondering at the exact depth of the scrutiny he'd be subject to. "But along those lines, how does something like this stay secret?"

“Through a lot of hard work and diligent effort,” Flint responded. “I’m sure you can imagine that nothing is really a total secret, and there are always people that know the truth. There are also plenty of rumors about us out there, especially among the various special operations and intelligence communities. Fortunately, we have a team who are the best there are at deflecting those rumors and getting rid of any hard evidence about us that may pop-up. We’re mostly self-financed thanks to people like Paycheck and a few others, which is another complicated process those teams can explain to you later, so we stay off official Pentagon budgets and requisitions. There’s a lot more to it, obviously, but you’ll figure that out as you go.”

“You’ve mentioned that a couple of times now, learning how things work....so can you clarify my job any?”

“It’s pretty much exactly what Hawk told you it was,” Flint assured him. “You’re here to document all the Joes’ stories, both operationally and behind the scenes. You’ll have opportunities to meet every member of the unit, meaning the hundred and twenty or so operational and the couple hundred support personnel, and you’ll be expected to create and maintain a record of their accomplishments and contributions as the unit’s historian. Hawk has even authorized you to accompany teams on ops, at the discretion of the mission leader, of course. There are no locked doors and no off-limits areas to you in that capacity, but that’s universal for the whole unit. If it’s Joe business and you’re a Joe, then you have a de facto need to know.”

“And who do I report to in my role? What’s my chain of command?”

“There really isn’t any. Hawk is the commander, so he’s obviously in charge of the whole operation and has final say about everything we do. I’m his XO, which means I represent him in his

absence, and I'm also the head of operations. Duke is the first shirt⁴, so he's in charge of all personnel and facilities and operations co-lead with me. Beachhead is our Chief of Staff and in charge of operational readiness, meaning he handles training and assessments and makes sure that all our people and gear continue to meet Joe standards. As far as everyone else on the team, we stay small by only recruiting the people we need to fill specific functions, and we only recruit the best candidates for any particular job. That means every Joe comes with a pretty high level of confidence in their abilities and trust in their decisions, which makes most everyone a mission specialist in their specific role and an authority within that role. It also means that Joes don't waste resources and don't do busy work. If someone tells you they need something done, you just operate under the assumption that it's mission essential and take care of it. The only real exception is during operations, which have a designated mission leader running things while on the clock. In your case, we've seen what you can do, we were impressed by how thorough your research was and how well your entries were written and sourced, and we brought you onboard to do the same thing here. So just go ahead and do it the way you feel it needs done and make your results available when anybody asks to see them."

Scribe sat in stunned silence for a moment as he absorbed the strange scenario Flint had just described. "That's going to take some getting used to," he said eventually.

"If we didn't think you had the ability to adapt and the right mindset and temperament to be a Joe you'd have never gotten an interview. Before long it'll all seem normal." Scribe merely nodded blankly at the assurance, so Flint pushed on. "Any other questions?"

"You said that there aren't any uniform standards here, but that I need to keep my regular uniforms ready. Plus, there was one already in my room when I got there. What about those?"

⁴ First Sergeant

“Most of us Joes are military, and we occasionally have to interact with other military units and organizations, so when we do that, we do it as normal soldiers. That means starched and shined, so every Joe has to be ready if that need comes up. As for the uniform in your room, when the Steel Battalion is operating in field support roles, which a lot of them do quite often, that’s what they wear. You’ll be wearing it if you go into the field at all as well. Operational personnel tend to stand out like a sore thumb if they’re armored up and masked, so we’re buried under false data trails. We don’t show up for facial recognition and all our biometrics lead to dead ends, which takes a whole lot of work. To make everyone’s lives easier, the rest of the team stays anonymous. But that’s one more thing you’ll have to learn more about as you go.”

Something Flint said had peaked Scribe’s attention, so somewhat more excitedly than he meant to he quickly asked a follow-up question. “If we operate in regular uniforms sometimes, does that mean that we learn each other’s names and ranks?”

“Sure. We may not use them, but we also don’t have to hide them from other Joes. Most of us know each other’s names and ranks already. After all we’re mostly military, so we always have those ranks in the back of our minds. And because I’m sure you’re sitting there wondering right now, I’m an Army W-3.”

“Really? You’re the XO even though you’re only a Warrant Officer?”

Flint raised a bemused eyebrow. “*Only* a Warrant Officer?” he asked, soliciting the expected instant paleness from his companion. He let out a short laugh at the other man’s obvious discomfort. “But yeah, I know it’s unusual. Especially considering the Joes have plenty of officers in our ranks. I told you though that we care about your skills and abilities, not what’s on your collar. Even for our leadership.”

Scribe waited a moment for his heartbeat to slow back to normal and decided it was best to go ahead and change the topic. "Ok, I understand. Can I ask why we're called Steel Battalion?"

"Think I won't notice you're trying to get away from that foot in your mouth?" Flint chuckled again. "Don't worry about it. Steel is an acronym for Support, Transportation, Expenses, Equipment, and Logistics. We use a lot of acronyms around here, and some of them are kind of a stretch. Not normal military acronyms either...ours have to be words for some reason. I don't know how it started, but it's become something of a tradition."

"Ok, that makes sense. The Steel part of it at least."

An awkward silence stretched out between them for several moments and it was apparent that Scribe wasn't in a hurry to ask any more questions.

"This is the easiest way to tell an operator from someone in support, in case you're wondering."

"What do you mean, s...um, what do you mean?" Scribe asked, his confusion at the statement obvious.

"You asked plenty of questions about organization and infrastructure topics. Operators usually just start by asking who the bad guys are."

"You said we're an anti-terrorism unit, so I assumed it was just generic terrorists?"

"What's a generic terrorist, and how would you fight them?" Flint asked rhetorically. "Our main target is actually a global organization called Cobra. Heard of them?"

"I think so...aren't they a militia or some kind of mercenary organization?"

"Among other things. They're actually an organization that specializes in recruiting and organizing other terrorist, criminal, and sympathetic political groups. They're involved in most large

scale organized crime, state sponsored by several countries, and hidden behind a huge network of legitimate businesses. They have resources like a small country, access to sophisticated technology and military hardware, and the capacity to field a small army, and they excel at supporting coups, precision attacks, and destabilizing governments and economies.”

“How’s it possible if that’s the case that I haven’t heard more about them?”

“Partly through our efforts to minimize their impact on the general population, and partly through their own efforts to reduce their footprint so it’s harder for us to target them. They’re the other thing you’ll be learning a whole lot more about over time.”

“Ok,” Scribe said, obviously overwhelmed by the volume of information. “Umm....ok?”

Flint smiled disarmingly. “Yeah, it’s a lot to take in. Why don’t we end here for now and you can go hit the dining hall and finish getting settled in. We’ve already made arrangements for all of your stuff to get picked up and transferred out here, so go ahead and take a few days to get familiar with the Pit and your gear and then you can get to work. If you need help with anything don’t hesitate to ask anyone you run into. Chances are they’ll all want to meet you anyway, so you’ll have plenty of chances to get to know them. You’ve also got a full personnel list and organizational structure on your PDU and computer to go ahead and start looking at too.”

“Ok, I’ll do that. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, s...Flint.”

“No problem,” Flint said as he stood and offered his hand, which Scribe mirrored. As they shook hands the senior Joe offered his encouragement again. “You’ll get into the groove here soon enough, so don’t worry about it. Welcome to the Joes.”