

“Come on in,” Paycheck said as he opened another unmarked door.

Scribe followed the other man into a small, sparsely furnished room. There was a basic wooden desk and chair on one side of the gaudily wood paneled space with an old-fashioned aluminum desk lamp sitting on it and a painting of George Washington hanging over the lone chair. Other than that, the room was barren.

“Nice office,” Scribe remarked dryly before realizing he had no idea about the rank or the status of the person he was addressing. “I’m sorry,” he added quickly, “I didn’t mean to be so informal.”

Paycheck waved the remark off as he stepped behind the desk, still facing the wall. “You’re a Joe now. Informal is what we do. Hawk says we’re all equals here day to day, so we’re all equals.” He ran a hand across the shade of the lamp as he passed before stopping eye to eye with the founding father. “Most of us either don’t know or don’t remember everyone else’s ranks until we’re in full dress<sup>1</sup>. Come on over here.

“That’s going to take some getting used to.”

As Scribe approached one of the panels slid aside, revealing a small space behind it.

“That’s not the only thing you’ll have to get used to,” Paycheck assured him as he grabbed Scribe’s arm and gently shoved him into the space and pressed his back against the wall. The other man stepped in behind him, uncomfortable close in the small space. “Sorry,” he said, his breath close enough to warm Scribe’s cheek. “We keep these things small as a security measure.”

The space lurched as Paycheck apologized and Scribe had the sudden sensation of falling. A faint mechanical whine filled the space. Only the faintest yellow light illuminated the pair of men, but judging by the slight smile on his companion’s face Scribe assumed he must have unconsciously shown his surprise at the unexpected motion.

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<sup>1</sup> Military dress uniforms.

“You’re also gonna have to start expecting the unexpected, since that’s what we Joes deal with most. For now just take it easy because we’re going to be here for a couple minutes. Next stop, the Pit.”

“The Pit?”

“You’ll see.”

The promised couple of minutes passed, stretching on into a seaming infinity in the cramped cabin, and the two passed the time in silence. Scribe assumed Paycheck didn’t enjoy them breathing on each other any more than he did. Finally, though he could feel the car slow, and eventually stop. The door opened and Paycheck stepped quickly back and out, Scribe stumbling awkwardly over the space he’d suddenly vacated. He found the pair of them in a stark white hallway and as the door behind them closed realized that the other 5 in the room matched it.

“Landing pad and security checkpoint,” Paycheck responded to the unanswered question. “Come on this way.” He walked toward one blank end of the space, which suddenly opened onto a large open room beyond with barely a sound. They’d only taken about two steps into the larger area when the meanest, most feral looking German Shepherd Scribe had ever seen suddenly stepped into their path and bared its fangs. Paycheck silently held out an arm to bring them to a stop.

“You guys having fun messing with the new guy in there?” Paycheck asked no one in particular.

“Come on, man. You know Order likes to give recruits a little test of his own,” a slightly staticky voice responded from a previously unnoticed speaker on the wall to Scribe’s right. As he looked at it a section of the wall became transparent, providing a view into what appeared to be a security office. “You didn’t even flinch when he came out new guy, so that’s cool, but now you have to advance and be recognized.”

Scribe stared at the man behind the glass who was speaking to him. The second of the room's occupants sat silently to the side, appearing to be trying to stifle a laugh. Scribe took a step toward the glass.

"Not by us. By Order," the speaker said as he gestured with his head in the dog's direction.

Scribe turned back toward the feral looking beast, shocked to see that the snarling visage had become even more full of violent intent. He took an uncomfortable step forward and a threatening growl escaped the animal, causing the hairs on his neck to stand up. Even though he knew this was only some kind of hazing ritual based on Paycheck's conversation with the other man, some primal instinct deep inside was warning Scribe to leave the dog alone. Instead, he steeled himself and slowly began to walk forward.

Each additional step only served to increase the threat that the creature was exuding, and by the time Scribe was within a couple feet he was sure that the thing was about to lunge at him. Suddenly, and with a spine-tingling bark, that's exactly what it did. The movement had been so quick that Scribe couldn't even process what was happening, let alone react. The next moment the dog's front paws were pushing down on his shoulder and its snout was darting straight toward his face. The new Joe involuntarily squeezed his eyes shut.

A warm, sticky wetness spread over Scribe's face and as quickly as the dog appeared he was gone. It only took a moment for him to realize with relief that what he was feeling wasn't blood, but that he'd been aggressively licked. Opening his eyes, Scribe found the dog now sitting happily in front of him, the corners of his previously disturbing maw now pulled back into something he'd have identified as a smile on a human, and his tongue hanging lazily out of one side of his mouth.

"Congratulations," the man who'd been speaking from behind the glass earlier said as he and the other one emerged from the room, "he likes you. Welcome to the Pit." He reached out a hand and Scribe shook it and the other that his companion offered before noticing Order was

holding a paw out as well. He paused for just a brief second as a before image of the canine flashed through his mind, but then reached out and grabbed it too. Order let out a brief puppy sounding yip and nodded in what Scribe could have sworn was approval.

“You’ve already met Order,” the speaker said as he was still shaking paws. Scribe let the dog go and turned to the man addressing him. “I’m Law. This guy’s called Watchdog. We’re part of the security detachment around here. Sorry about that little welcome, but Order seems to think it’s a ritual.”

“No problem,” Scribe replied, nodding a greeting to each in turn. The introductions made using codenames were still unusual to him, causing his brain to hiccup as it processed the information. He realized that neither man was wearing a uniform per se, but rather cargo pants with one wearing gray and the other brown, boots, and t-shirts, but with an unmistakably law enforcement themed belt around their waist. Law’s shirt looked to be from an MP unit, and as best Scribe could tell the weapon on his belt was some variety of Uzi. Watchdog’s t-shirt on the other hand looked to be from some band but was so faded as to be mostly unreadable. His belt was weighed down by the unmistakable heft of a Desert Eagle. “I’m Spec....err...Scribe,” he mumbled.

“Alright, come on man,” Paycheck said as he started to walk away. “You’ll have plenty of time to chat with these guys later. He tossed the pair a wave over his shoulder without looking back. Scribe nodded to the men again, and then to Order when the dog caught his attention with a brief *woof*. Law waved and Watchdog offered a nonchalant two finger salute as he turned to hurry behind Paycheck as the other man led the way silently down one of the many hallways that branched off the central hub. The only sound between the pair was the sound of their footsteps echoing off the bare walls.

“So, your codename’s Paycheck huh? Are you a finance guy?”

“Yep,” was the brief answer. A few moments stretched out and Scribe realized his companion wasn’t going to elaborate.

“Why do some people have such on the nose codenames? It didn’t seem like most of those people in the meeting did.”

Paycheck turned down a branching hall. “Yeah, just us greenshirts have names based on our jobs. The operators have codenames based on their jobs or personalities or pretty much whatever they want.”

“Greenshirts? Is that what we’re called?”

“Not officially. It’s a throwback from the Joe team’s early days when they tried to keep support roles filled with regular military. That made it a little tough to keep things secret though. Our actual title here is Admin, Logistics, and Support, or if you prefer then the Steel Battalion.” Paycheck stopped suddenly in front of the nearest door and punched a short code into the adjacent keypad. “Come on in and see your new home.”

Nodding his thanks to the other man’s welcoming gesture, Scribe stepped into the room. It was significantly larger than any of the barracks rooms he’d previously been assigned, and even had its own bathroom. Instead of a metal framed bunk and thin mattress there was an actual bed, as well as a large desk with a very modern looking computer and filing cabinet. He opened one of the wardrobe closets in the room to find it already filled with gear. He noticed that his personal bag, which he’d left in the car, was sitting off to the side. “What’s all this?”

“That’s standard Steel Battalion load-out. Sometimes we deploy to support the operators, and this is how we stay faceless.” Paycheck reached into the open locker and pulled out a fully enclosed helmet. “As Joes we officially don’t exist, so we don’t show anything in the field that can identify us. That’s also why we get codenames based on our role, so we can refer to each other by title in front of non-Joes.”

A faint electronic chime sounded and Paycheck held up a finger as he handed Scribe the helmet and turned toward the door. Finding himself more interested in the gear he was holding than the unexpected visitor, Scribe slipped the helmet onto his head, shocked to find that it fit as though it had been made for him. The elasticized liner felt somewhat uncomfortable

against his neck, but he could taste the crisp filtered air that it kept sealed within. As he took his first couple of breaths small displays lit up on the lenses in front of him.

“What do you think?” Paycheck asked, his voice coming through inside the helmet in a clear, mechanically amplified tone.

“Wow, this thing is pretty cool,” he replied, noting the echoing, semi-robotic sound of his own voice. “What does all this do?”

“Later, man. You’ll have plenty of time to get familiar with it.” Somewhat disappointedly Scribe pulled the helmet off to find Paycheck holding a small black device out toward him. “For now, you should worry about learning how to use this.”

Scribe took it and a screen flashed to life with the message *Authenticating...Scribe confirmed.*

“This little toy is called a personal data unit, or PDU. It’s something that every Joe has that fully encrypted with satellite communication and access to the pit network and a bunch of other stuff. Mainframe and his team whipped it up, so of course it can do a million things more than anyone needs it to. They had to finish loading your biometrics before they dropped it off.”

“Mainframe....so computer guy I assume?”

“Obviously. He’s in charge of what we like to call the IT department, though they do a whole lot more than fix your computer. Like making that thing or collecting your fingerprints and voice and DNA and coding it to only work for you.”

“So, Mainframe is the OIC<sup>2</sup> or NCOIC<sup>3</sup>?” Scribe asked, fishing for an idea of the rank structure in place here in this strange new world.

Paycheck chuckled. “We don’t do those. We’re more of an HMFIC<sup>4</sup> org structure here in the Joes.”

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<sup>2</sup> Officer in Charge

<sup>3</sup> Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge

<sup>4</sup> Head Mother ummm....let’s say “Friend” in Charge

“This is not how the Army is supposed to work,” Scribe observed.

“Who said we’re the Army?” Paycheck countered. “You better not let Gung Ho hear you saying that.”

The idea that this new unit Scribe found himself a member of wasn’t just made up of Army personnel hadn’t even occurred to him, and he took a moment to think of the implications and try to remember if he’d blundered over that with anyone else yet. He remembered the Sergeant Major at the interview who General Hawk had introduced as Beachhead, and picturing the amphibious nature of the Marines swallowed hard at what he was sure had been a huge assumption on his part. He immediately felt a sense of nausea wash over him, since insulting a Sergeant Major was never a great career move.

Paycheck must have seen the look on his face because he responded, unprompted. “You really don’t have to worry about that for the most part. Once you’re here, you’re a Joe...period. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard...it really doesn’t matter. There are some guys that will make you think it does, but they’re all talk. Just, uhh, don’t tell Gung Ho and Leatherneck that I said that.”

“Uhh, sure. Our little secret. Did you say Coast Guard?”

“Oh yeah...as far as you’re concerned the Coast Guard is real military here. Cutter will never let you forget it if he hears you say otherwise.”

Gung Ho, Leatherneck, Cutter, Crankcase, Duke, Lady Jaye....Scribe’s head was swimming with all of the strange secret clubhouse codenames. The lack of rank, the loose structure, the missing uniforms, they were making him feel completely out of his depth. He held out a hand to steady himself against the locker.

“Don’t worry,” Paycheck said reassuringly. “This is about the point it starts to hit everyone. It’s understandable though. You’re definitely in a whole new world here, and there’s going to be a lot to learn and a whole lot to get used to. No one expects you to do it all at once though, and the best thing about a unit like this is that every other person that calls themselves

a Joe will bend over backwards to help you and make sure you find your place. At the risk of leveraging an already overused cliché, Joes are closer than family.”

Scribe looked up to meet the other man’s eyes and saw the sincerity there. “Thank you. That helps, and it makes me feel a lot better.”

“Good,” Paycheck said with a curt nod as he turned to leave. “I’m glad you feel that way, because you’ve got a meeting with Flint in ten minutes.” He began to walk toward the exit.

Feeling like he’d gone from reassured to punched in the stomach, Scribe stammered. “Flint? The XO? Where?”

“His office. Ask your PDO, it’ll show you how to get there. Good luck.” He hit the button to open the door and stepped into the hallway.

Lost in his swirling thoughts, Scribe failed to respond before the door slid shut.

“What the hell does that mean?” he asked frantically to the now empty room.