

Metal Gear Solid : The Twin Snakes

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A quasi-novelisation of MGS:TTT told from the POV of various characters. More of a collection of character studies, really. Ongoing and a re-vamp of the ff.net version which has been up for some time.

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Chapter 1 - 1. Briefing

2

1 - 1. Briefing

METAL GEAR SOLID – THE TWIN SNAKES

A Quasi-Novelisation

By WolfOfTheSteppes

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Author's Note: This is a semi-novelisation of Metal Gear Solid, told from the POV of various characters. I've tinkered with a few little things, and there may be a few little bits of extra dialogue, however I will attempt to stay as true to the original game script as I can. The story may venture into uncharted territory from time to time... events or places not of the game per se, but most will focus on the game and the possible thoughts and feelings of the characters. The ending remains in question... whether Meryl lives or dies is a subject I am happy to leave to the whim of my readers.

Since the majority of characters are military, they may well use descriptive military terms. The same goes for the genetics and robotics... authenticity and all that.

Also, a little warning about my finicky habit of updating previous chapters... it may be worth re-reading some of them from time to time. In addition, any questions you may have in regards to this story I will be happy to answer by review or e-mail.

Anyhow – This one's dedicated to all my fellow fans out there; you all know who you are. Enjoy.

"An offering of reasons,

We put them all in play

A covering of treasons,

That one by one we let slip away

I have seen you on the edge of dawn,

Felt you here before you were born

Balanced your dreams upon the edge of thorns,

But I don't think about you any more..."

Briefing: 0400 Hours
Snake's POV.

Roy looked ten years older, though it had only been about six years since our last meeting. The old lines on his face were deeper... and he had a few more of them; he looked dead tired - as though he hadn't slept in a good few nights, and the strain was showing through that wan, but otherwise civil, smile. Glad to see me, on the one hand, I figured - but he looked indisposed, reluctant. I guess I wasn't feeling so civil myself at that time; all I offered in return was a derisive glare.

If I'd known at the time just what I was getting myself into, I would've thrown our friendship to the wind and demanded a return to Twin Lakes. Funny... how some deceptions can bring two people closer in the end... or it can incur the opposite; but I suppose we all have our reasons.

"It's been a long time, Snake," he said affably, when he first entered the briefing room. I was surprised to see him in his drabs, decorations and all, FOXHOUND insignia on the left arm; but not the one I remembered. I'd retired from the show; but as I later learned, the Unit had far from followed suit. Even with the loss of its chief members and founder, FOXHOUND was still very much alive.

My old code name.

"I should have known you were behind this, Colonel." I rasped, voice rough with fatigue and irritation.

"That's no way to greet an old war buddy, Snake."

"What do you want from me?"

I was, after all, sitting there in the briefing room, butt-naked, where I'd been frog-marched in by the same marines who'd accosted me at my cabin. It was a little different from usual; they don't normally send soldiers after soldiers... and here I sat, without a word of explanation for my abduction... only OPSEC, National Security, and all that crap.

"I just invited you here so we could have a talk," he replied, almost conversationally; though his voice was edged, charged with something a little like desperation. He knew me better than to expect a friendly reaction under the circumstances... why the pleasantries?

"Invited?" I grated. "That's what you call sending armed soldiers after me?"

He shrugged. "Sorry if they were a little rough with you. But we've got a serious situation here... only you can get us out of it."

I was tired. Close, all-pervading warmth filled the room, cameras buzzing in the background, adding

treble to the steady bass thrum of the engines. It wasn't my first time in a sub's briefing room, of course; I'd been in plenty during my training for the Unit, but I can't say that I ever liked them. Claustrophobic overtones only served to fuel my agitation, and the impromptu medical exam my uncertainty... and smoking wasn't allowed. Physical exhaustion mingled with a growing antipathy and resentment as I waited for some kind of explanation. He offered me a smoke anyways - maybe to lighten the mood a little; I took it, eyeing him carefully as I tapped it on one knee.

"Colonel, I'm retired from FOXHOUND," I said flatly. "You're not my commander any more. I don't have to take orders from you - or anyone else."

"You will take these orders," came the brusque reply. "I know it."

At that moment, the room's single door swung open and a woman in a lab coat appeared. That doctor I'd met earlier... who'd examined me mutely just after I came on board. Looked in her late twenties; long brown hair and dark, inscrutable eyes. She gave me a brief, evocative look; this time I traded a passive glare for a vindication.

"Who's this?" I asked Roy.

"This is Dr. Naomi Hunter," he answered, shifting out the way for her. "She's chief of FOXHOUND's medical staff, and an expert in gene therapy."

She nodded and smiled stiffly. I guess I just stared back at her. I wasn't one for small talk... especially when I was tired and tetchy... and being held against my will. But I was intrigued, too; she looked out of place, somehow... those calm, practiced movements of hers so detached, almost mechanical; a beacon of composure amid the infusion of apprehension on board, apprehension so saturating it was like a taste in the air.

"Are you military?" I asked.

"No, civilian. I've been sent here from ATGC. Pleasure to meet you, Snake."

She didn't offer to shake, but instead took my right arm... rubbed it with a sterile pad. She wore a vacant smile, and in her other hand was a hypodermic.

"What's the shot for?" I grunted warily.

"What's the matter? You don't like shots?" she asked, pushing the needle into my ulnar artery. There was a vague pulsing sensation of pain before the pressure evened out, then a dull throb as she pushed down on the reddening puncture. Roy turned away, reaching for his clipboard, voice slipping back into that old, authoritative bark I remembered so well.

"Snake, listen up," he said. "It all went down five hours ago. Heavily armed soldiers occupied Shadow Moses Island; a remote island off the coast of Alaska."

"What soldiers?" I returned.

"Next-Generation Special Forces, being led by members of Unit FOXHOUND. They've presented Washington with a single demand - and they say that if it isn't met, they'll launch a nuclear weapon."

"A nuclear weapon?" I echoed, incredulous. "You gotta be kidding."

So that's why I'd been dragged out of bed at two in the morning by a gang of armed grunts, I thought dourly. A nuke...

"I'm afraid so. You see, the island is the site of a secret nuclear weapons disposal facility."

He handed me the clipboard – a collection of military satellite surveillance pictures of the Island, a tiny blob just off the Fox Archipelago; on it a cluster of dark, rectangular buildings of various sizes, stark against a bleak background of snow and glacial features. There didn't seem to be much in the way of above-ground structures, naturally. Pretty cosy, I thought. It's a hardened shelter, remote, and a good place to dig in. But...

"FOXHOUND hijacking a nuclear weapon?" I repeated, as if to assure myself.

My former Unit...? This was nuts. FOXHOUND were a military Special Ops group, not terrorists. Although...

Roy lit me up, and I took a drag. The nicotine tasted good, better at four in the morning than it ever had done.

Although... FOXHOUND had started out as quite the reverse.

"Now you know how serious the situation is," he went on. "You'll have two mission objectives. One is to rescue DARPA Chief Donald Anderson, and also the president of ArmsTech, Kenneth Baker. Both are being held hostage."

"Some heavy-duty hostages," I commented, frowning.

DARPA... the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency...

"Secondly, you're to investigate whether or not the terrorists have the ability to make a nuclear strike... and stop them if they do. Any questions?"

"Questions?" I snorted. "I haven't even said if I'll accept this mission yet."

"Well, you can make up your mind after you hear more about the situation," he replied gruffly, pacing slowly, hands knotted behind his back.

My arm was still stinging some from the Doctor's shot - something I'd not been given the luxury of being able to pass on. It'd occurred to me then... that the op was already underway; that I was being indicted. But Roy kept the good humour in his voice, even as I glowered at him, satisfied to listen... at least while I savoured that cigarette.

"Then tell me about this disposal facility."

I took note as I smoked; picking my way briefly through the satellite shots and the rundown, pages of blanked-out type and all the rest of it, while Roy went through the details verbally... as was SOP. Even after five years retired in Alaska, I hadn't lost the gift of having my eyes and ears in different places. I watched the doctor out of the corner of my eye, that oddly poised precision she had... an aloofness. When she glanced up and caught me, we exchanged cold stares before she averted hers for something else on the medical tray.

Serious type, huh?

The disposal facility was largely subterranean: a hardened ex-military base deterring air attack, with the supposedly added bonus of being a solid construction for the containment of dismantled warheads. Obviously, satellite and infra-red surveillance were a waste of time; they needed someone to penetrate and get a good look at the lie of the land.

Sounds like a corny spy movie.

Air insertion was impossible. A storm had been reported over that way twelve hours previous, and now it was hanging over the Shadow Moses region, refusing to budge, like some living, breathing thing. Since the facility had radar, the Discovery intended to approach within a few miles of it, launching an SDV modelled after a torpedo, yet lacking the tell-tale propulsion system. It looked as if I was gonna be the sardine in the can.

All very straightforward, and prettily planned, I thought bitterly. As it always seems... in the Briefing Room, that is. Reality was a different game, I knew; things seldom go to plan when you're out there, alone, in the shoot. That was something they didn't propose a contingency for, or maybe... they hadn't because there wasn't one.

"After the SDV gets as close as it can," Roy instructed, "dispose of it. From there on you'll have to swim to the underground dock on the island."

"You want me to swim in sub-zero Alaskan water?" I scoffed.

"Don't worry," he answered quickly, "We've got you a sneaking suit: the latest in poly-thermal technology."

I glanced at it hanging nearby; parts of it resembled a high-pressure diving suit, two-piece; the torso reinforced with a bullet-proof resin casing. The Doctor continued to scrutinise her instruments in silence as I received my orders.

"The disposal facility covers the whole island. I'll instruct you by codec after you reach your target."

"Anyone going with me?" I enquired... more out of curiosity than expectation. I always worked alone; but the magnitude of this mission didn't exclude the possibility of backup. Some company might have reassured me - at least it would've meant things weren't all resting on my shoulders -if it wasn't for the

fact successful infiltration is best demonstrated in smaller numbers; and besides, I wasn't all that keen on having someone tag along. More people, more problems, I recalled mentally.

"As usual, this is a one-man infiltration mission," Roy affirmed.

"Weapons and equipment OSP?"

"Yes. This is a top-secret black op. Don't expect any official support."

That's black ops for you, I thought. Plausible deniability. As for being sent in naked - without gear - I guess I got used to that in the Unit. As Master once told me: "if they send you out into the field with traceable weapons, you'll give up more than the Big Four if you're captured." Instead, I'd have to procure on-site... and use whatever I could find to serve my purpose. It'd be a major hassle; in the marines, they say only Special Ops are nuts enough to take that kind of crap from their C.O.'s.

Yeah, I guess we were.

"The Chief of DARPA, and the president of an arms manufacturing company... what where they doing there?" I asked dubiously. It was a remote Alaskan military base after all, not some snug governmental office.

"Apparently secret exercises were being conducted at the time the terrorists attacked."

"Must have been important exercises. Do we know exactly where they're being held?"

Then the Doctor spoke up. "The DARPA Chief has also been injected with a mini-transmitter. When you get close, you should be able to pick up his location on your radar."

"Do they really have the ability to launch a nuke?" I pressed, now that I was being drawn into the details, being sucked into the situation, despite my earlier reluctance. I wanted more information, or rather, I needed it... I did if I chose to accept the mission, anyway. But already the gravity of it all was beginning to seep into my self, and with it a sense of... presentiment. A notion that the decision had already been made, on many levels, and not just by me; perhaps, too, by some other part of my conscious, something not governed by reason or choice - I wasn't sure. But my ears were open now and listening hard, eyes focused on the matter to hand. My concern was already involved, whether I liked it or not.

"They say they do." The Colonel sighed. "They even gave us the serial number of the warhead they plan to use."

"Was it confirmed?"

"Afraid so. At the very least, they've got their hands on a real nuclear warhead."

"But I thought there were safety measures to prevent this type of terrorism..."

"Every missile and warhead in our arsenal is equipped with a PAL. But even so, we can't rest easy. The DARPA Chief knows the detonation code."

"But even if they've got a warhead," I persisted, "it must have been removed from its missile. They're dismantled warheads, right? And it's not exactly easy to get your hands on an ICBM."

The Colonel started pacing the room slowly. "Since the end of the Cold War, you can get anything if you have enough money and the right connections."

I guess he was right. FOXHOUND members were recruited from the four corners, and all kinds of dubious backgrounds. Some of them had even been defectors. I'd been out of the Unit for six years, but if they were still operating to standard, then they'd be no easy catch. If anyone had the training and expertise to mastermind this kind of stunt, it was FOXHOUND, with connections to match. Since they were 'unattached', they were more like mercenaries than real army... and with those guys, there's always a risk.

"So exactly what are their demands?"

He shot me caffeine-weary glance. "A person's remains," he answered, sighing heavily.

"Remains?" I exclaimed. This was ludicrous. First FOXHOUND turn on their own side... then they threaten the world with a nuke for...

"Cell specimens, to be more accurate," he continued, with a wave of the hand.

"What for?"

"The terrorists need them. You see, these Next-Generation Special Forces have all been strengthened through gene therapy. The military was following up on the Human Genome Project by working toward identifying genes responsible for making effective soldiers."

"There are genes that do that?" I muttered sceptically.

The Doctor stepped in again. "I'll explain this part. With gene therapy we can splice genes into soldiers with beneficial effects. But it depends on being able to isolate and identify positive 'soldier genes' in the first place. That's why we studied the genomic information of one of the greatest soldiers ever."

Greatest? The 'Legendary Mercenary'...

"You don't mean Big Boss?" I blurted.

"That's right. We've been working feverishly to identify those genes responsible for his incredible combat skill. So far, we've discovered about sixty of the so-called 'soldier genes'."

So his body was recovered after all... I speculated numbly, but I might have said it aloud. I thought back to him... to his torched body, crackling fiercely amid the wreckage of Outer Heaven and Zanzibar Land... his self-proclaimed revolutionist state; to the makeshift flamethrower in my hand as I knelt, crushed by his final words... those words, even as he'd hunted me down -

"His cells have remained frozen in a cryo-chamber," the Colonel confirmed. "His genomic information is a priceless treasure to mankind."

"Priceless to the military, perhaps," I grunted cynically.

"His body was burned severely, but we were able to restore his DNA profile from just a single strand of his hair," the Doctor explained.

Memories long suppressed were struggling to resurface, and I turned my mind away; but still I heard that voice, that long, hateful scream, undying; never to truly fade or be forgotten. "You have gone too far. Too far..."

"You people are amazing," I observed, though not with much admiration. I had to hand it to them, though: they were persistent all right...

"Snake, we can't give them his body," the Colonel interjected. "It's potentially more dangerous than all the warheads on that island."

"I heard the terrorists are calling themselves the 'Sons of Big Boss'," the Doctor added earnestly.

The Sons of Big Boss. That's a good one, I thought.

"How well armed are they?"

"Heavily."

"Battle experience?"

"The six members of FOXHOUND in charge are all hardened veterans. They're tough enough to eat nails and ask for seconds."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from FOXHOUND," I grumbled. I was reminded of the last time I'd had a run-in with operatives from my own side; I barely made it out alive.

They live for combat. Just as I did...

...Once.

"Your former Unit, and one that I was a commander of," the Colonel mused, shades of nostalgia flitting briefly across his lined face. "They're every bit as good as when I was commanding them. The others aren't your average grunts either. The Next-Gen Special Forces are a pretty international group; they started out as an anti-terrorist Special Ops group made up of former members of biochem units, technical escort units, and the Nuclear Emergency Search Team. Until 'they' were added, that is."

"'They'?"

"These guys didn't start out as regular army. Most were from a merc agency that I think you're familiar

with: part of Big Boss's private guard. After Big Boss went down, the military just bought out all their contracts and they were merged with our own VR unit, Force Twenty-One, and retrained."

"Great," I muttered. "Video game players."

"Don't forget, they've all been strengthened through gene therapy," the Doctor interrupted. "Don't get careless just because they don't have much experience."

I looked at her.

"I thought using genetically modified soldiers was prohibited by international law?"

"But those are just declarations, not actual treaties," she replied quietly.

"Anyway, how could a whole unit be subverted to rebellion?"

"They're calling it a revolution," the Colonel answered, jadedly. "I guess they saw the unit as their only family. Since they all went through gene therapy, they probably felt closer than brothers."

I was a little sceptical. After all, if these grunts were regular army, they'd have been interviewed periodically by army counsellors. According to the Colonel, they all got straight A's in their psychological tests: apparently fine, upstanding, patriotic soldiers. Until they went and consulted classified information about the 'soldier gene' experiments, and started conducting their own tests with an automated system, that is. It all sounded pretty fishy, but by this stage I was just craving another smoke.

"The existence of this Genome Army is a national secret of the highest order," he declared. "We were hoping we'd be able to investigate this thing quietly, behind closed doors."

And that's why you wanted me, I thought, frowning. A covert ops specialist for the ultimate black op...

"Unit FOXHOUND," he carried on, "an elite group combining firepower and expertise. There are six members of FOXHOUND involved in this terrorist activity: Psycho Mantis, a powerful psychic with telekinetic abilities; Sniper Wolf, a deadly sharpshooter; Decoy Octopus, master of disguise; Vulcan Raven, a giant and shaman; and Revolver Ocelot, an interrogation specialist, and a formidable gunfighter."

"Sounds like a bunch of cartoon characters," I ended sarcastically.

"Finally, in charge of them, FOXHOUND's squad leader: Liquid Snake."

I lit up another cigarette. The room was dark, and the throb of the sub's engines was rattling in my brain. I was probably seeing double with fatigue; now I was hearing double too.

"Liquid Snake?"

"The man with the same code name as you," was the Colonel's enigmatic reply.

Snake... the code name for an infiltration and covert expert. As far as I was aware, I'd been the only one of those since the Unit was formed...

"So tell me what you know."

A briefing sheet of the FOXHOUND Commander's details was handed to me, along with some of his basic stats and military history. The guy looked to be in his early twenties in his mugshot, with blonde hair about the shoulders. I guess that's why I didn't see it right away.

"He fought in the Gulf War as a teenager - the youngest person in the SAS - tracking down and destroying mobile Scud missile launching platforms. You were there too, I believe. Didn't you infiltrate Western Iraq with a platoon of Green Berets?"

"I was just a kid myself back then," I reflected, taking another drag.

"The details are classified, but it seems that he originally penetrated the Middle East as a sleeper for the SIS."

"A spy?"

"But he never once showed his face in Century House. After that he was taken prisoner in Iraq, and there was no trace of him for several years. After you retired he was rescued, and became a member of FOXHOUND."

...So that's why he's called Snake, I noted thoughtfully. But...

"I thought they were no longer using code names," I cut in.

"I don't know his real name," he shrugged, "that information is so highly classified that even I can't look at it. Here's a photo of him."

He passed me a more recent mugshot. In it, Liquid had the same long hair and unfathomable eyes, but now he appeared to be in his thirties and tanned. And then I saw it - his features... the eyes, bridge of the nose, jawline... even his lips - it was like staring into a mirror. It might have been me in the picture.

What -

"Pretty shocking, huh?" the Colonel continued. "His skin tone and hair colour are a little different, but otherwise you two are exact duplicates."

"I have a twin?"

"I don't know the details, but it seems so. That's why we really need you for this mission."

"You're the only one that can beat him," The Doctor added. "Now that I've met you, I know. You've got something that he doesn't - I can see it in your eyes."

I didn't find that thought very comforting; maybe it was the way she said it. I watched her as she collected her instruments up from the bed and left the room, steps clicking away up the corridor.

I'm the only one that can beat him? What is this, some kinda contest? my wits demanded acrimoniously. Perturbed, I turned to the Colonel.

"What about the time limit?"

"They say they'll launch after twenty-four hours," he replied gravely. "And that was five hours ago." His face was a mask of strain; he wiped his forehead.

"Did they say what the target will be?"

"So far they haven't mentioned the target."

"Colonel, who are you speaking for?"

"Naturally, I'm representing the U.S. Government."

"So who's in supervisory control of this op?"

"The President of the United States."

"I guess that means he'll be meeting with his top aides in the Map Room right about now, huh?" I wondered.

"No... at this point they're still video conferencing with each other."

"If that's a real nuclear warhead, shouldn't they issue a COG?"

It was standard practice after all; in the face of nuclear strike...

"Not yet. The Secretary of Defence is in operational control and is fully aware of the situation. After you infiltrate, if you determine they possess nuclear launch capabilities, a COG will be issued."

At least that made some sense. No point in panicking over empty threats...

"Since they haven't relocated to the nuclear shelter under Mount Washington, I suppose there isn't that much reason to worry yet," I replied, weighing up the situation. "Is the NSA in on this?"

"Yes. And so is the DIA."

"DIA? I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this."

Actually, I'd been having a bad feeling about it ever since I'd been escorted onto the Ohio-Class Discovery; but now my qualms were raising proper; none of it seemed right, least of all the fact no-one seemed to be in their right place - Roy, the hostages, FOXHOUND... none of them...

And now the poison-pen lobby, too.

"They'll be sending us some support."

"We don't need desk jockeys," I shot gruffly. "We need backup from a specialist. I'm just an amateur when it comes to nuclear weapons."

I took another drag on the cigarette, eyeing the Colonel attentively. He folded his arms and sat down on the office chair before me.

"Of course. A nuclear weapons specialist has already been assigned to us. She'll be providing you backup by codec."

"A female analyst?"

"She's built up an impressive record as an advisor for the Nuclear Emergency Search Team," he explained. "She's also an expert in hi-tech weapons. Contact her if you have any questions. She'll be working from her home in Los Angeles."

"California," I breathed, trying to imagine the place as I sat in that cramped, dark, steel room, somewhere under the freezing Bering Sea.

...Seems like a world away.

I sighed, stubbed out the cigarette butt on the metal floor. I've got no reason to get involved, I reminded myself sharply. I'm in retirement, after all. And as far as I'm concerned, I've earned it... and hadn't I already made up my mind to decline back when I was being 'strip-searched' by the Doctor...?

...Granted, this is big, but it's not my scene any more.

"Colonel," I began, "I don't work for the government any more. Let me go back to Twin Lakes."

"Why, Snake? Is your life in Alaska all that great?"

He sounded put out, though he should have expected it's what I'd have said. I'd heard enough, anyway.

"There's a dog sled race this week," I answered. "Next Saturday I have to be in Anchorage."

"The Iditarod? The longest dog sled race in the world? When the hell did you become a dog musher?"

"Right now, my fifty huskies are my only family. I've gotta take care of them."

"Don't worry about your dogs."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"Snake, this vessel is headed for the Bering Sea. There's no room for debate."

Just as I thought: all that banter before, 'invitations' and old friends... they probably only called him in because he was the only one who knew me, could play the comrade with me. But I could see through that; and I wanted him to know it, too.

"I told you," I grated angrily, rising up, "even if I do owe you, I don't owe anything to this army, or this country!"

"You will accept this assignment," he snapped firmly, pushing me back.

"Why would I be stupid enough to do that?" I countered. "I'm no patriot."

"Snake, you committed a whole lot of crimes of treachery during your days as an agent. There's enough dirt in your file to keep you in the stockade until you're a very old man..."

"Oh, I see." I sneered. "Blackmail."

"No, Snake," he went on, pained, "that's just a little scheme the brass thought up. But anyway, I know you better than that. You'd take this assignment even without the threat."

It didn't sound like Roy. He was a bastard sometimes - Hell, we all are... but he isn't a blackmailer.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you're a natural-born soldier," he answered ardently. "You're not the 'grow old gracefully' type. It's the same for all of us who've seen real action. I'm a soldier too: I know those feelings of powerlessness; frustration that you feel every day. You've tried to play the boy scout out here in Alaska, but you can't race dogs in the snow forever. Why don't you come back to us? Be a soldier again."

"You think my life is some kind of joke?" I growled.

"Snake, I just want to give you back your purpose in life."

I was silent. He sighed, and fixed me with his grey eyes; they seemed beseeching, almost desperate. He was saying one thing, but his eyes were saying another. Please. And here I was, being jabbed and made to walk the plank, wondering if maybe someone else wasn't busy making a dent in the back of Roy's nice green uniform.

"Colonel, you're retired," I pressed. "Why are you involved in this?"

"Because there aren't many people who know FOXHOUND as well as I do."

Maybe so, but...

"Is that the only reason?"

"I've been soldiering for a long time. I don't know anything else. I guess even though I'm getting a little

old, I still love to be in the field..."

I wasn't stupid, and he knew it. Dug out of retirement too, he sure didn't look to be loving any of this any more than I was.

"Colonel, you're a lousy liar."

He seemed to crack; sat down again, hands on his knees, meeting my scrutiny evenly.

"Okay," he confessed. " I'm sorry, Snake. I'll be frank. A person very dear to me is being held hostage on that island... my niece, Meryl."

"Your niece?" I exclaimed. "What's she doing there?"

"Several soldiers were reported missing on the day of the revolt, and she was one of those called in as an emergency replacement."

He showed me her file. She was tall, red-haired; a young, vibrant-looking woman in her late teens, or perhaps early twenties.

"She looks like you," I remarked.

"My little brother's girl. He died in the Gulf War. Since then I've been watching after her."

"A personal motive?" I asked. "That's not very soldierly, Colonel."

"I'm retired. I'm just an old man now. And I'm your friend."

"Since when are we friends?" I replied sharply, the heated exchange of a few moments before still beating in my brain.

With my personality, I didn't have too many friends. I was a loner, and always had been; it was just easier that way. It was hard enough finding people to trust, and those I did trust either died, or betrayed me. I lived alone, I was happier that way... quite apart from the fact kidnap and blackmail didn't exactly qualify as friendship to me -

"I've thought of us as friends since the fall of Zanzibar," he answered. "Please, Snake! Save my niece."

I guess I couldn't blame him for trying...

"All right," I said, resignedly. "But I have two conditions."

"Name them."

"One: no more secrets between us. I want complete disclosure at all times. And two: I'll only accept orders directly from you Colonel. No cut-offs, okay?"

"Agreed," he smiled, and relaxed a little. "That's why I was called in."

Well, now I'd gone and done it.

But I was beginning to feel a little better already. It gave me an odd sense of déjà-vu... being back in the Operation Room again, preparing for a mission. Though it was unwelcome, the familiarity gave me a recognizable sense of belonging. I was back doing the stuff I did best, the stuff I'd spent my whole life making second nature, that brought with it a welcome respite from the convolutions of an idle mind. I reached reflexively for another smoke; noticed the tiny puncture from the Doctor's shot had bled a little, leaving a small mark like a bruise.

"That Doctor," I said to Roy. "Is she part of this operation too?"

Presently, she re-entered the room - almost as if she'd heard me.

"She's in charge of FOXHOUND's gene therapy. She knows more about those men than anyone else."

"You mean you've... seen them naked?" I asked her, with a smirk.

She straightened up, unimpressed. "Make no mistake. I'm not a nurse, I'm a scientist."

I guess I was feeling a little better... now that I'd committed myself; now that the choice was out of my hands. I always did hate my life being in someone else's charge. At least I could look forward to being in control of my own destiny again, whatever else awaited me. It was a relief of sorts.

"By the way, what was that injection for?" I asked.

"It's a combination of nanomachines and an anti-freezing peptide, so that your blood and other bodily fluids don't freeze even at sub-arctic temperatures. There are different types of nanomachines too, to replenish the supply of adrenaline, nutrition and sugar in your bloodstream, so you don't have to worry about food. I also put some nootropics in there."

"Say what?"

"Nootropics. A class of drugs which will help improve your mental functioning."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. Benzedrine. It'll keep you alert and responsive for twelve straight hours."

"That was quite a cocktail," I breathed. "Anything else?"

"Those nanomachines will help keep your radar's batteries charged up."

"Well... I guess I can call you when I'm ready to go on a diet."

"You're welcome," she smiled, turning away.

So, now it comes to it...

"Well... better move it," Roy said at last, after a pause in which he watched me make up my mind for real, sucking in a final, resolute breath. Yeah, Roy knew me... well enough to know that the choice was made; that all I wanted now was to get on with the job. He spoke to me as a friend, the sound of old trust manifest, a fondness for our acquaintance he was plainly glad I'd not forced him to break.

Just then, I remembered something. I whistled to the Doctor.

"Need to borrow your scissors," I said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry, just gonna clean myself up a little," I replied. I'd been pretty lax with the hair, and it'd grown into a regular mane down my neck. I made sure to cut some off the back; after all, I didn't want to be mistaken for the leader of the terrorists.

The second 'Snake'...