

MC 051: Thunder Machine

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G.I. JOE #51

Thunder Machine

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Summary: "Somewhere in the New Jersey swamplands -- the Dreadnoks, having fled the destruction of Springfield with Storm Shadow, find an unexpected guest in their hideout." She claims to be Zartan's sister, Zarana. The Dreadnoks don't remember her, but they do remember Zartan's brother, Zandar. "No one can remember his face." Storm Shadow doesn't trust her. Inside the Dreadnok's gas station, they meet Zandar -- who they don't even notice sitting in the corner -- and Thrasher, a mechanic they haven't seen in years. Zarana offers them some grape soda, a buck-fifty a bottle and Buzzer doesn't like it: "Hmmm... When Zartan said his sister was cheap, I thought he was talking about something else altogether!" Zarana's angry to discover Zartan's been captured by the Joes and is being held at The Pit. A frightened Buzzer tells her that he knows where The Pit is. Zarana intends to break Zartan out, thanks to some Joe team dossiers she intercepted from a federal courier.

Later, at the entrance to Fort Wadsworth, Zarana and Zandar arrive in the Swampfire. Zarana is disguised as Lady Jaye and Zandar is supposed to be an electronic interrogation specialist sent to run tests on Zartan. Most of the Joe team is on their way back from their battle in Springfield (last issue), and only Tollbooth, Thunder and Sergeant Slaughter are at Joe headquarters. After Zandar asks for some privacy, the Sarge and Thunder leave. Zartan and his siblings climb back onto the Swampfire and ride the hydraulic lift back up to the motor pool. Zarana and Zartan disguise themselves as Scarlett and the Sarge. On the way up Zartan says he's touched that his brother and sister came to rescue him. But Zarana says the reason she freed him was to find out where Zartan has hidden the trove of gold he stole from a South American dictator. As they talk, no one notices Storm Shadow climbing out of the Swampfire and down into the elevator shaft.

Back on the security level, Thunder finds some classified electronics equipment is missing. He calls Tollbooth in the motor pool just as Zartan and his siblings arrive at the surface. As Sgt. Slaughter, Zartan orders Tollbooth below to help with the search. As they leave the motor pool, they run into a new Joe, Cross Country, in his HAVOC tank. Cross Country knows they are imposters. He just saw Scarlett back at McGuire AFB with the other Joes returning from Springfield. They start up the Swampfire's helicopter blades and take off, and Zarana calls Cross Country a hill-billy on the way. "I'm no hill-billy," he shouts. "I'm a red-neck -- and proud of it!"

At McGuire AFB, the Joes have returned. Sgt Slaughter radios Hawk and tells him the situation. The Sarge points out that the communications devices Zartan stole can be used by the Joes to track their whereabouts. Hawk sends a team of Joes lead by Flint into the New Jersey marshlands in the AWE Striker and Mauler tank. Hawk, meanwhile has got an appointment at the Pentagon. He heads off with Wild Bill in the Dragonfly copter.

In the marshlands, the Swampfire lands where the other Dreadnoks are waiting along with Thrasher's Thunder Machine. Zarana demands payment for her expenses, but Zartan tells her not to worry. Cobra Commander will pay plenty for the stolen com-link and the location of the Pit. Buzzer tries to tell Zartan he was the one who told Zarana where to find the Pit. Zartan tells him to shut up. Apparently, he's still upset over Buzzer stealing his motorcycle (issue #35). They all decide to head to the gas station hide-out, but they take two different routes: Zarana and Zandar in the Swampfire and Zartan and the Dreadnoks in the Thunder Machine.

Back at the Pit, Sgt Slaughter heads off in the HAVOC with Cross Country. He rides on the top turret while Cross Country sits inside, driving the tank. Out in the swamps, the Joes are waiting to ambush the Swampfire. They pop up out of the swamp, guns blazing. They dodge the Joes' fire, but Alpine snags the swamp copter with a rope which Shipwreck ties to the Mauler. The Swampfire crashes into the swamp. Zartan watches from far away and he and the Dreadnoks head out in the Thunder Machine to rescue them. The Joes hear a roar and turn to see the Thunder Machine heading straight for them. The Thunder Machine evades fire from Roadblock and the AWE Striker and Thrasher uses the gatling guns to take out the Mauler, and knocks the lighter AWE Striker out of the way. The Dreadnoks gets away, and Flint radios the HAVOC.

Thrasher leaves the swamp via a partially flooded road, and finds the HAVOC heading toward them on the same road. Sgt Slaughter notes, "We're down to a game of chicken, Cross Country!" Their two choices are to get off the road or

smash into the Thunder Machine head on. Cross Country knows there's only one option, since the HAVOC would sink "like an anvil in a septic tank" if it ended up in the swamp. Thrasher has a third option. He has all of the passengers lean to one side, causing the Thunder Machine to go up on two wheels, allowing it to blow right past the HAVOC, close enough to knock the Sarge's hat off his head. He heads into an oil refinery, with Cross Country gaining on them, chasing them all the way. He gets close enough to ram the Thunder Machine, but Thrasher veers off, knowing that the HAVOC isn't maneuverable enough at high speeds. Both vehicles smash through the refinery's fence, and head out into an open field where they fire upon each other.

As they head toward a speeding train, Ripper's getting worried that Cross Country's matching Thrasher's every move. "Yeah? Well, I've got one advantage over him..." Thrasher says, "I'm completely nuts!" He heads directly for the train and isn't going to stop. "You're nuts!" Ripper shouts. "That's what I said," Thrasher answers, "You deaf or something?" He fires the Thunder Machine's gatling guns at a freight car and smashes through one side and out the other, trapping the Joes on the other side of the train. The Dreadnoks can't believe they made it. Thrasher seems offended: "Hey. I said I was nuts... not suicidal!"

Sgt Slaughter takes off in the HAVOC's small utility flyer, trying to follow the Thunder Machine, but it's gotten away. A few minutes later, he comes upon a gas station. He asks the man working there if he's seen any unusual vehicles. The attendant worries that the flyer is "one of them cheap Soviet Bloc imports" taking jobs away from Americans. Sarge assures him it's all American-made, so the attendant tells him where the Dreadnoks went. "The fellers you want went tooling down that road over there! Dressed like a bunch o' punk-rockers they were!" After the Sarge leaves, the attendant takes off his hat and sunglasses to reveal he's really Zandar. "Zandar, you have no shame," his brother Zartan says with a smile. "Why should I? Nobody ever remembers me!"

Review: "'Thunder Machine' is a fun story, with not much of a plot to go with it. The fun lies in how the Zartan and family outsmart the Joes and get away in the end.

For the most part, the Joes serve a supporting role, and even then the most used are Sgt Slaughter, Tollbooth and Thunder. Larry Hama is obviously stretching to use some Joes that didn't take part in the big battle in issue #50, since he only has three Joes guarding the Pit and two of them make their first and nearly only appearances. Thunder's appearance is two years late, and Tollbooth's one year late. Their vehicles don't even appear for another few years.

As usual, the Dreadnoks provide lots of humor. Zarana's real reason to rescue Zartan, she claims, is to find out where he hid some stolen gold from years back. Buzzer's frightened attempts to get back in Zartan's good graces are funny, especially when Zartan just tells him to shut up and never steal his bike again. It's interesting to notice that Buzzer hasn't seen Zartan since before issue #35. From that point on, Buzzer doesn't get back to Cobra until issue #46, and that's when Zartan is mistaken for Ripcord. Thrasher is a fun character because he scares the other Dreadnoks, and his crazy actions do work out in the end. The battle between Cross Country's HAVOC and Thrasher's Thunder Machine will leave Cross Country with a score to settle -- something he brings up much later in issue #81.

The main problem with the issue is the ease with which Zarana and Zandar get into the Pit. At the gate to Fort Wadsworth the guard doesn't need to see Lady Jaye's ID and papers for the new vehicle simply because he recognizes her. That might be excusable if not for the fact that a stranger -- Zandar -- is right next to her. That's pretty lax security. The Pit seems even worse. It seems that Zarana doesn't have Zartan's holographic capabilities, so her face is still her own. Even so, three Joes think she's Lady Jaye. Also, Sgt Slaughter gets rid of the armed guard (Thunder) protecting Zartan just because Lady Jaye and this new specialist asks him to. Not exactly a smart idea considering how much difficulty they had catching Zartan in the first place.

Despite these problems, the action scenes are a lot of fun, and it's always great to see the Dreadnoks in the spotlight of an issue. Zandar's act at the end makes for a funny scene, especially when he refers to the Dreadnoks (himself included) as a bunch of punk rockers. After this issue, Zandar is sadly underused. The running gag in this issue that no one ever remembers Zandar must be true, since Larry Hama forgets about him as well, instead focusing on Zarana. The cartoon does the same thing, probably because Zarana is only the second Cobra character, and thus more interesting in such a male-dominated comic.

First Appearances:

- G.I. Joe Team: Cross-Country, Tollbooth, Thunder
- Cobra: Zandar, Thrasher
- G.I. Joe Vehicles: HAVOC
- Cobra Vehicles: Dreadnok Thunder Machine, Dreadnok Swampfire

Reprinted in:

- The Transformers (UK) #166-169 (May 21st - June 11th, 1988). A Marvel UK series that began reprinting Action Force

stories after the end of that series. These issues reprint this story in four parts, alongside original stories. All references to "G.I. Joe" were changed to "Action Force".

- Classic G.I. JOE: Volume 6 (December 2009). A trade paperback collection from IDW Publishing. Includes issues #51-60.