

When the government and military conspire to conceal what she and her classmates discovered, a shy student and her boyfriend work to reveal it to the world: an impossible intelligence embedded in the fabric of the Internet.

OUTSIDERS: Vol. I

By W. C. Collier

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OUTSIDERS

VOL. I



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Chapter 1

Bulbous, faceted eyes, blown wildly out of proportion, huge, reflecting an oily rainbow of green, orange, and brown hues, leaving room only for the tiniest bit of head to support them—just enough head to attach also what it had in place of a mouth: this jointed arm, reaching down out of grotesque unfolding mechanisms to dab the table with a bristly sponge of flesh. How bizarre, he thought, that something so alien would have a taste for cheap beer. It dabbed at the puddle, and he watched it, fascinated, because he did not really want to be here.

The fly, fastidious beggar, took a moment's pause to clean its face and those monstrous eyes, and then Constantine set his mug down, scaring it away. This left him with nothing to do but turn his attention back to his job. The package was nothing much to behold; a man, but scrawny, unkempt, his button-down shirt partially untucked, wrinkled, discolored with several days' worth of accumulated sweat, his hair greasy from an equal time without a wash. The fly was cleaner than this weaselish creature. He sat at a table on the next patio over, the

neighboring café, if a word like “café” could be applied to these dirty, foul-smelling... “shit-hole” was the word in Constantine’s mind. He had never been a man of high rhetoric.

He fancied himself a man of action, but look how far that had brought him. This was the most exciting mission he’d been assigned in years, and he was lucky to have it, given everything going on— That train of thought he put aside. If he had two disciplines in life, they were his ability to exercise religiously and his ability to put off thinking about problems like those, unpleasant situations that made his chest clutch and his breath flow more forcefully and loudly through his nose, in a way the anticipation of combat or stepping off the ramp of an aircraft never did. Instead, he turned his thoughts back to the complaint of the moment: This place, hot, smelly, stupid. The sweat was enough to drive one mad.

Constantine, like all his kind, hardly shied from a good sweat. A good workout, a good fight, a good... But this? This sweat was greasy, laden with the oils of his skin and the dust and dirt of a third-world trash-heap of a town, and, more than anything, it never stopped. There was no way to get cool, here. Even the “cold water” tap in his hotel room produced only a gurgling stream of tepid, slightly yellow fluid. He had several pimples already, and the one to the right of his nose now tempted his finger. It was growing hard and painful, but no matter how he pinched it, it was not yet ready to burst.

The spook arrived, and he thanked God. She was the only redeeming feature of this mission. Her presence here made perfect sense, now that he had laid eyes on the weasel of a man they would be collecting. Of course he would not be one of those enticed by principle or patriotism or even greed, but by simple sex-appeal. Just look at him; even through his terror, his eyes leered at her as she sat down at his table. Sex-appeal she had, and she knew how to use it. (And the Agency knew how

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to use it.) Constantine only had the hind-aspect view, from his current vantage, but that was sufficient for his purposes. Her tube-top left shoulders and arms bare and exposed a good portion of her midriff all the way around, down to her cut-off denim shorts. She was sweaty too, and her hair greasy—Constantine suspected deliberately so, in keeping with the hygiene habits of the local culture—but she made it all work, kept it all balanced on the fine middle ground between blending in and making a man think about the things he might do with that hair she now flipped back behind her bare shoulder.

Fantasy was as far as it could go for Constantine. He was married, and while that alone might not have stopped him, he more importantly was already in enough trouble, and under enough scrutiny. He could not afford any further complications at the moment. In any case, he was pretty certain she was already having her way with one or two of the younger men on his team. The truth was that he was no longer the young stud; he was the old man, and the baton had passed on from him whether he had cared to pass it or not.

Constantine glanced away from the meeting, across the road toward the hotel, such as it was. All of its windows were open, most of the curtains drawn closed, which meant that the rooms they had secured for overwatch looked no different from any other, from the outside. There the curtains were just sufficiently parted that a marksman, set up on a makeshift platform inside each room, could aim through the gap at an angle, covering the meeting place and some distance up the narrow street. They had two such positions, at opposite ends of the block, giving them overlapping coverage of the cafés plus good reach in both directions. The rifles were configured with suppressors and subsonic ammunition. In the confines of this street, no engagement would reach even a hundred yards, and

heavily armored opposition was unlikely. Even at a mere thirteen hundred feet per second, a heavy, spire-pointed bullet would have no trouble across those distances doing lethal work to soft flesh and bone, and would do that work almost silently.

For his part, Constantine had a submachinegun tucked into a messenger bag of the sort favored by foreigners on travel to this region. No suppressor. If his gun came out, down here, in the crowd, it would be because all hope of stealth and deception had been lost. Not that any of this would be necessary. No trouble was anticipated. Every indication by the intel folks was that the package had made a clean escape, and that he was of no particular value to anyone, so no one would be looking for him. All of this security, Constantine's team, was a joke, unnecessary, perfunctory, and perhaps more for show than for anything else. Constantine suspected that it was a proof-of-concept. Their parent command had lobbied to put them on this detail just to demonstrate that white-side special operations could execute this mission set. A push for relevance, and as such a glorified, expensive, sweaty pile of bullsh—But Constantine was not a man of politics any more than he was a man of rhetoric. At least they were on an “op,” and the exfil would be interesting. And it was real, rather than training, rather than another very expensive make-believe play. There was a real package. And there was a real spook with a real fine—

“Fuck you, Kato,” muttered Constantine under his breath. “Ethnic mother fucker.” All of this coarseness of thought and language, which would have thoroughly enraged the soft social puritans among his neighbors at home, and which might even have exceeded his own habits there, flowed easily here, not just for him but for most of them. It was a kind of heat sink, an unconscious way to disperse the stress even this quiet, easy operation imposed, helping each to maintain the necessary air

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of calm, allowing each to convince himself that he was completely relaxed. It was said, “Never trust a man who does not drink, smoke, or curse.” At least, Constantine and his ilk might admit, it was hard to trust a man who did not allow himself at least one such vice in the field. A man with no heatsink was liable to melt down at the wrong moment.

Staff Sergeant Katonesh, whose actual ethnicity remained a perpetual mystery, had a complexion and features which allowed him to look at home in almost any third world country where they might operate. That reality, or the acknowledgement of it, might also have scandalized more than a few of the moral guardians outside their community, but it was why he was seated at a table just beyond the package, playing the innocent local and enjoying a full, up-close, frontal view of the spook’s assets, while Constantine maintained close security from the neighboring patio, with his man-purse full of steel and lead and his inferior perspective on the only action going. Kato was leaning over, now, shaking hands with the package, whose surprise, at discovering that one of his escorts had been sitting at the adjacent table all along, was evident. The spook stood up, her hair tumbling down her back just about to the lower hem of her tube-top, and Constantine lamented that he had not partaken of the local night-time entertainment scene. (There was certainly no “action” waiting for him at home.) But that chance had passed. By nightfall they would be out of this God-forsaken country and on their way back. At least the exfil would be interesting.

The spook departed on foot, taking her purse and making her way up the street. (Hate to see you leave; love to watch you go, he thought.) She would be heading back to her day job, her official cover, mission complete. The rest was up to his team. Again Constantine glanced at the window across the street on the second floor. There was nothing to see there. It was

unchanged, and nothing was visible beyond its partially open curtain; he looked because he lacked discipline, because he was not a professional spook and this was all a bit of a sham anyway. Behind that curtain, the detachment commander (a commissioned captain) would be on a line to higher, announcing that they had the package and would now be consolidating, the first step toward egress.

The sooner the better, thought Constantine, since there were to be no prostitutes in his future. The package paid his bill, stood up, crossed the street, and disappeared into the hotel. Some minutes later, Constantine's phone buzzed. An innocuous text message asked if he would be home on time. The most fun aspect of preparing for this mission had been coming up with coded text messages once they had realized that the best means of communication in country would be simply to buy some pre-paid cell phones. "Sure thing," he typed. "Love you." After another twenty minutes, Kato paid his bill and departed, and Constantine gave it another ten before making his own exit. He took a round-about route to the rear of the hotel that stood across the street from the meeting point. It was a two-block walk to reach a destination not fifty feet from where he had started, and he felt silly the entire time, but there was no sense in doing it poorly if it had to be done. By the time he reached the correct room on its second floor, the rest of the squad was already present.

"Good to go?" asked the captain.

"Yep."

"All right. Calling our ride." The captain pressed "send" on his phone and then resumed making sure all of his gear was squared away. Constantine stepped past him to the window, looking down at the café where the exchange had taken place. There was nothing to see. There would be nothing to see. No one cared, about them or the package. All of this spooky

tactical nonsense was for show, a lot of highspeed, low-drag masturbation, as far as he could tell. Constantine could feel himself becoming more irritable the closer they came to departure.

The detachment commander's phone buzzed. "Truck's here," he said after glancing at its message. He, Constantine, and the others hefted their bags and made their way downstairs and out the rear exit, where a truck and a car sat idling. Kato was at the wheel of the car, with others of Bravo Squad divided evenly between the two vehicles. Constantine climbed into its back seat, next to the package. The captain went to the truck. The rest of Alpha Squad squeezed in where they could. Thus reconstituted, the team rolled out.

Outside the city, they met four more trucks which joined with theirs. The entire company was now in convoy. This was nonsense, by Constantine's estimation. One person in a compact could have picked up the package and driven him to the coast just as easily, but risk-averse leaders up and down the chain, determined to see a success for white-side with no problems, had insisted on overmanning the operation to an absurd degree, not least because there would be no ISR—no intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, no eyes in the sky—overhead. HQ hated nothing more than being blind, leaving the team to operate on their own without Dad looking over their shoulder, as if they were a bunch of grown men.

Constantine's irritation continued to wind higher and tighter.

Still, it was a bit of a strange feeling to be out here on a real op with no ISR coverage, so contrary to the normal SOPs—Is that redundant? he wondered. "Normal SOPs?" In any case, if the lack of air meant they had to roll in three full teams, over thirty men strong, it could be worse. At least this way local crime was a non-factor. Bandit gangs setting up

roadblocks to prey on isolated travelers were not unheard-of in this area, and Constantine quietly prayed for such an encounter before they reached the beach. It would almost make this whole farce worthwhile if they could slaughter some pissant gangsters on their way out. As the convoy headed into the countryside, he unpacked his weapon and then sat back, leaning his forehead against his window and watching the fields and woods slip past. It took considerable willpower not to smell the rest of his team, much less the odor of the weaselish, terrified man seated next to him.

Time passed, and miles passed. Five-Four-Four and Five-Six-One had plenty of fuel in reserve tanks. The convoy stopped to fill up and then continued on its way. They were traveling generally west, and the sun sank before them, painting an orange blaze across the countryside ahead. There was something particularly forlorn about the farms they passed, some abandoned, some which only looked abandoned, littered with the ruins of defunct equipment, old cars, leaning sheds, and piles of plain trash. There was something forlorn in the eyes of the indigenous folk, as they rattled by in the few, ancient, barely-functional vehicles they possessed, staring openly at the convoy of vehicles packed with strange, clearly foreign men going the other way. The trucks and car were “locally sourced,” their passengers dressed in civilian garb and displaying no military hardware, but all of them going along at such a clip together, all of them filled to the brim with grim-looking alien faces, was a certainly bizarre and probably unsettling sight. What would the locals think? A foreign military unit? Or would they be more likely to presume Constantine and his fellows a band of cartel soldiers, bound for another battle in the local, perennial mob wars? Who knew how savvy they were, or what they could guess? They could, at a minimum, guess that it was all well above their heads, that

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this convoy was but a foot of one of the many gods ever striding across their world, under which they did their best simply not to be crushed. Better not even to see them.

“Fuck,” muttered Constantine as the tension in his chest became unbearable. The coast was growing nearer, mile by mile, and beyond that the ship, and beyond that home. Even talking to the weasel-man was preferable to this silence. “So what’s your deal, anyway? Just couldn’t take it anymore? Working for a government of ass-holes?”

The weaselly one looked at him with wide eyes, no doubt caught aback by Constantine’s address after hours of terse silence. He sat sandwiched tightly in the middle seat between Constantine and another operator, and he had been doing his best so far to shrink himself into the narrowest form possible, to draw no one’s attention. Now, unsure of what to make of Constantine’s sudden attention, he glanced at the other passengers for clues, but they continued to ignore him.

“Well?”

“I have to deliver information to your government,” he said, his accent thick but his grasp of the language sound.

“Yeah? What sort of information?”

The package again looked at Constantine with wide eyes. “I cannot say. It is very important.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded.

Constantine sniffed, turning his gaze to the window again. “I got news for you, bro: the fact that it’s us picking you up means it can’t be all that important. How’d you even convince ‘em to extract you, anyway? What are you? Politician’s aide? Science type?”

“I do communications. I work for your country for many years. Now...” He trailed off.

Constantine, despite himself, glanced at the man, and saw on his face that continuing look of terror. It was as if he lived constantly in the state of a rabbit, hearing rustles in the bushes around him, but with no safe hole into which he might scurry. Yes, thought Constantine. More rabbit than weasel. Scared, all the time. Constantine had presumed him to be frightened by the irrevocable and risky step he was taking with this escape, but if he had been a source, a spy, for so many years as he said, then such fear was probably a way of life for him now. Constantine wondered if the man could remember how not to be scared.

“What’s your name?”

That wide-eyed stare again. “George,” said the package.

“‘Now,’ what, George? You’ve been spying for us for years, and getting away with it. What changed? They get onto you?”

He shook his head vigorously. “No. They don’t know. We must reach the shore before they know. I was very careful. They would kill me if they knew that I know what I know. What I learned. Your government needs to know. Everyone needs to know. The world.”

Constantine’s eyebrows were up a bit, now, and a couple of the other men were also throwing sidelong glances toward the aft middle seat, but George seemed not to notice. His eyes were suddenly fixed on something in his own mind, something he obviously believed to be as dire as his rhetoric indicated.

With another nasal snort, Constantine turned away again. He prodded at the stubborn pimple on his face. “Well, we’ll be on the boat soon enough. You got papers or something? Thumb drive? Anything we need to take care of?”

George was still for a moment, and then he shifted his weight to liberate a side pocket of his trousers in the vehicle’s tight confines, leaning against Constantine in the process. Too

close, bro, thought Constantine, as his nose took an unwelcome gulp of George's several-days-fermented aroma. The odious man fished out a smart phone. "It is here. The proof. I will show this to your government."

"Chark, you got a bag for this?"

"Yeah," said the soldier in the front passenger's seat. He dug into his kit and came back with a zip-lock-style bag, one of the puncture-resistant, air-tight, chemical-proof kind favored by people in their line of work. Designed for the Space Program, the brand advertised. More often used to keep cell phones dry in the rain, or in their case a damp ride through the surf. "Put your phone in this, sir. This will keep it dry until we get to the boat."

"Thank you," said George, taking the bag and sealing his phone inside it.

"Touch screen should still work."

George noted with some small delight—a dim stirring under the canopy of his constant fear—that Chark was correct: the phone's screen registered his fingertips even through the bag's tough plastic. "So what's on there? What is it that the world just has to know?"

"I can't say," repeated George.

Constantine rolled his eyes. "The whole world needs to know, but you can't tell us."

"Get me to the ship," said George, and then he met Constantine's gaze again, and Constantine saw that his fear had returned in full.

"Suit yourself, man. We'll be there before you know it. Does the Agency know? My government?"

George pressed his lips together for a moment. "They think they know. They do not. They... would not have believe me if I had told all. I get out. Then I tell all, after they can not kill

me.” His accent was thickening, his grammar becoming less precise.

“How the hell did you convince them to make this extract, then? You never did say.”

“I paid. Everything I have. They owed me. She said, I work for your government, I get out when time comes. I say, time is now. I pay money. All my money, for you to take me to your country.”

Constantine was stunned. “You paid?” he asked, his incredulity sharpening the word to a fine, hard point.

“Yes. Everything I have. The world must know.” George’s hands had closed now, tight around his bagged phone.

“God damn,” muttered Constantine. He felt more than a little insulted that this entire operation, his men, at risk in a foreign land, had been bought by some sleaze-bag low-level spy who wanted out early, but another piece of him could not help but wonder at the conviction, or desperation, of a man who would risk his life for years, only then to give his life savings to buy his way out. This guy was, to say the least, not fitting well into the spy stereotypes one reads about in novels or in the mandatory annual insider-threat training presentations. Constantine began to wonder, as he once again turned his attention to the world outside, if George really did have something special, some revelation, that might retroactively justify all the song and dance. That would be a nice middle finger to tier-one.

“What the fuck?” snapped Constantine. Such was his tone of surprise that everyone but the driver looked at him.

“Chief?” asked one of them.

“Drone,” Constantine replied.

“Say what?”

“RPA.”

“Are you serious?”

“I swear to fucking God, I just saw it, paralleling us, just past the tree-line.”

“What the fuck?”

Constantine already had his phone out, but he changed his mind. “Comms. Everyone on comms, now.” He began pulling his headset and radio from his bag and powering them on. As he settled the cups onto his ears, he leaned forward over the center console, between the two front seats. “Honk,” he said.

His driver did not hesitate but gave the car’s horn a couple of pulses. In the truck ahead of them, they saw a couple of faces look back, and Constantine motioned to his headset. The faces turned forward again. After a moment, Constantine and his companions could see them donning comm gear. Constantine turned around, making eye-contact with the folks in the truck behind his and again motioning to his headset. He could see the looks of confusion in their eyes, but they too began digging into their kit.

“Two-Two, radio check,” said the captain’s voice in his ear.

Constantine squeezed his push-to-talk. “Good check.”

“What’s up, Rob?”

“RPA, nine o’clock, low altitude, running parallel to us,” said Constantine.

There was a moment’s pause, and then the captain’s voice said, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m God-damned sure.” Easy, Rob, he counseled himself. Calm breeds calm.

“What type?”

“Not sure,” replied Constantine, and grimaced as soon as he said it. “Fixed wing,” he added. “Small, low-altitude. Not any kind I’ve seen before. I only caught a glimpse of it.”

Another pause, and then, “Okay. Will relay. Keep everyone up comms and eyes out.”

Constantine looked around at the others in the car, the staring eyes, George's wider than ever with a sudden crescendo of his fear, the others calm, narrow, professional, waiting for more information.

"I am not hallucinating, I swear to God," remarked Constantine. "Eyes out. See if you can spot it, or anything else." They turned their gazes to the scrolling treelines and warm sunset without. Constantine looked over at George. George averted his gaze, turning his attention once more to that specter only his mind's eye could see. Finally, Constantine directed his attention to the world, fixing his watch on the patchy woodland and trying with all his might to penetrate into it for any hint of the untoward, and beyond it, above it, for any corroboration of his claim which even he was beginning to doubt.

"Fuck y'all," he muttered. He had seen it. Small, fixed-wing, strange for its compact shape. Drones tended to be lanky, slender things, especially the small ones, with long, thin wings fit for efficient gliding and tiny bodies just sufficient to house a low-power, long-winded motor, a few bits of electronics, and what amounted to a digital camera. This had not been of that shape; he remembered it so clearly—at least its outline, its silhouette against the sky in that bare moment when a break in the trees had revealed it. It had been more like a squat fighter jet or a hawk. Could it have been a hawk? Could he, in some fit of paranoia, have mistaken an actual raptor for an enemy drone?

"Saber is putting up a chickenhawk, see if they can spot this thing," said his captain's voice in his ear. Five-Six-One, callsign "Saber," occupied the two trucks bringing up the rear of the convoy. Constantine rolled down his window and leaned out, looking back toward the trucks to watch. It took a minute, but eventually a head and torso appeared over the roof of the

nearer truck, holding a man-portable remotely-piloted aircraft, or “RPA” in the vernacular. (Theirs was a profession rich in vernacular.) He had somehow wrangled himself half-way out the tailgate window, probably with a buddy holding onto his legs, and was now holding up their toy airplane with its nose into the wind and activating its motor. The launch was more graceful than Constantine had expected, but he had never seen anyone attempt it from the back of a rolling vehicle before. No need for a toss. He held it up, and after a moment gently released it. It floated in the wind, seemingly stationary over the truck but for a little wobble, and then it tipped up and separated from them, falling behind and climbing into the sky. The drone operator would be inside the truck, on the control console.

“VDL is up,” said the captain’s voice into their ears. “Four seven one seven if you have a rover.” More vernacular. Video down-link. Tactical remote video receiver (RVR, or “rover”). Endless acronyms and short-hand names. Unfortunately for Constantine, his car did not have a rover kit. His team possessed only one, and it was with the captain in the truck ahead of them. The captain continued: “Word from HQ is no intel on any kind of elevated threat. My intent is to keep eyes out and press on. Report any sign of aircraft or RPAs, any people or vehicles on the ground, but keep your weapons out of sight. Headsets off, too, for now. Put a radio on speaker. We’re going to continue to keep a low profile until we’re blown for sure.”

With a sigh, Constantine removed his headset, set it in his lap, and disconnected the headset’s push-to-talk connector from his radio. The radio would automatically revert to its internal speaker. His companions were doing likewise, and he saw a couple of them turn their radios off to preserve battery. There remained several hours of driving between them and the coast.

The mood in the car had shifted, from boredom to a moment of heightened alert, and now to a sense of anticlimax. Maintain a low profile, the captain had said. It was probably nothing. Continue on course. Constantine could feel his irritation returning as his own adrenaline subsided.

“Contact unknown RPA, break,” said the captain’s voice, now thinner and more mechanical from the tiny speakers of their two operating radios.

“I fuckin’ told you,” said Constantine—to those in his car, not over the Squad Command net. Instantly his adrenaline was back.

“We’ve got it on VDL,” the captain continued. “It’s... fuckin’ weird all right. Got to be military, but—” His transmission fell silent.

The men in the car traded glances. The sounds of their rickety third-world conveyance bumping along the rough third-world road filled the pregnant pause in radio chatter.

“Well, it’s gone,” said the captain.

Constantine snatched his radio to his mouth and squeezed the transmit button. “Gone how?” he asked, with more bite than he had intended.

“Took off. Don’t know if it realized we were following it with the chickenhawk or just decided to bug out, but it took off like a rocket. Way too fast for a prop drone. It’s gotta be some kind of miniature jet.”

“Who has something like that?” asked one of Constantine’s companions. More importantly, thought Constantine, why would it be here, following them? Part of the sales pitch for this op had been that this country was essentially a permissive environment. Not a friendly nation, per se, but not an environment in which a near-peer power would try to interfere with them even if they were detected.

Constantine found himself looking sidelong at George again.

“From One-One, forget about low-profile,” said the captain’s voice, emanating from the two radios. “Gear up.”

“Vik four copies,” replied Constantine.

“Gonna need you to move, George,” said Mills, the operator opposite Constantine in the back seat. George looked confused, and then even more confused when Mills unbuckled George’s seatbelt and Constantine pulled George onto his lap. They had prepared for this eventuality, not because it was expected, but because preparing for it was fun. You pay three dozen men to sneak into another country and play spy with a government budget, they’re going to get your money’s worth out of the experience. They had removed all of the solid paneling between the trunk and the rear seat within a day of purchasing this car—giggling as they had done it, like a bunch of school-boys—so that now all that remained was to chop through the upholstery and seat cushion of the middle seat, which took no time at all with George out of the way. Mills began hauling bags into the tight confines of the car and passing them around. That done, Constantine put George back in his place, the now backless middle seat.

The new gear consisted primarily of compact plate-bearing vests, their vest-mounted tablet computers, and magazines loaded with extra ammo for their submachineguns. Five-Eight’s rifles were in “vik three” with the captain and the other members of their team, but even those were configured for quiet work in town against mostly unarmored opponents. Four-Four and Six-One had the full-power weapons. This was not to say that, should they encounter a serious adversary, Constantine and his team would sit idly by. After all, if your enemy is wearing body armor and all you have is a pistol, you just have to shoot him in the face. So it was said.

Constantine wormed his way into his vest, donned his headset and reattached it to his radio, and then began settling the radio and other accoutrements onto the vest's webbing in their respective places. As he worked with one hand, he keyed his push-to-talk module with the other. "Matt, Rob. We need to figure out how they DF'd us, whoever they are. We'd have noticed a tail out of the city."

"Yeah. Maybe a call in from the locals. And looking at that drone, I think we can guess who it is, which means peer adversary. Kill the phones. I'll talk to HQ."

The others in the car were listening. They looked to Constantine, who nodded. "Batteries out."

Each man cracked open his locally purchased cell phone and pulled the battery. Constantine looked to George, who clutched his phone to his chest as if it were his dead mother's pearls.

"The battery does not remove," he said.

Mills took it from his hands, extracted it from its plastic bag, and he was about to set at it with the same knife he had used to cut his way through the seat cushion a moment earlier, when he paused, staring at it. He looked up at Constantine.

"Seriously?" asked Constantine.

"Oh yeah," said Mills.

"God fucking damn it, George." But in his mind he cursed also the spook and her people. Where was this in the intel?

Once Mills had the screen off, he prised out the battery and dumped all the pieces back in the bag.

He sealed it and tucked it into a pouch on his vest.

George looked heartbroken. "Once we get it home, they'll be able to repair it no problem," said Constantine. For now, it goes with Mills. How the fuck did no one suspect they'd be tracking your phone? Why didn't anyone mention a phone from the get-go?"

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The terrified man had no answer. Perhaps he was wondering the same thing himself, or perhaps he had kept the phone a secret even from his handler. Constantine did not press the issue; there was no point, and no point in further prejudicing his men against the package they were ordered to deliver safely.

“Chief?” prompted Chark.

“It’s done. Eyes out. If they’re going hot on his phone, it means they’re serious.”

They were quiet for a moment, and then Chark voiced the real question on everyone’s mind:

“Are we really going to—”

“You let the GFCs worry about ROE,” Constantine barked, cutting him off. “All of you. I doubt anyone wants to make a big international incident here, no matter what this guy has. But if they do, self-defense still applies. If someone shoots at you, you put ‘em down. If you have a good reason to think they’re about to shoot at you, you fuckin’ put ‘em down.”

Mills donned his sunglasses. They were the cool-guy wrap-around shades so stereotypical of the operator community (and operator wannabe communities), but they had a purpose, which Constantine knew well, beyond their industry-standardized ballistic protection rating: You dress the part, it helps you act the part. Cool-guy shades and a cool-guy beard, and all this high-speed kit, helped a young operator with relatively little actual combat experience feel like a “bad-ass mother-fucker,” and if he felt like such, if he believed he was such, there was a greater chance he would act the part when rounds flew. Constantine did not begrudge the young ones a few stereotypical embellishments. Far from it: He had been wearing his cool-guy shades since they left town.

“From One-One, weapons hold,” the captain relayed over the team net. “If we do run into anyone.”

“Copy,” Constantine transmitted back, and then released his PTT. He looked again at the men in his car. “Self-defense still applies.”

They drove on. The blazing sunset light was fading and would soon be too dim to justify their sunglasses. Once again, they were back to only the sound of the wheels and the wind and the rattling of their vehicles, just enough to drown out the pounding of their own hearts. This was like the ride in on a helo, except worse. On the helo, you knew you were going in because circumstances were in your favor.

The big, open secret of special forces was that they didn’t take on a fight they weren’t relatively certain to win. Superior manpower, superior equipment, the element of surprise. The infil was always nerve-wracking, but one could feel justified confidence, because the mission was carefully planned after being carefully chosen. This mission had been chosen and planned the same way. Within its original parameters, there was no reason to expect it to be much more than a very realistic drill. It was those original parameters which were now shot to hell. Cell-phone surveillance. Advanced jet-powered RPAs no one had ever seen before. All the indications of a peer-state adversary who were taking George’s treachery a lot more seriously than anyone had anticipated. The parameters of advantage, shot to hell.

The car slowed precipitously, just as their radios announced, “Contact on rover. Road-block, one mile. Stop stop stop. Reverse in place. Vik six is now point. We’re working on a—” Chatter in the background, and the captain paused. “Saber just lost the chickenhawk. MANPAD.” (Technically, MANPADS, for man-portable air defense system.) Constantine rolled his window down again, and the others were doing likewise. He leaned out and looked ahead into the setting sun, but he could not find over the trees what he sought, the

telltale steep smoke trail of a shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile.

Within seconds the drivers had reversed course, and the convoy was rolling back the way it had come.

“Cutlass is putting up their drone. Hang tight. One-One is working on a route.” Speed had become the order of the moment. Create time and distance between themselves and the ambush point now behind them, and find another route before the enemy could react and reposition. The drivers had transitioned from highway mentality to rally mentality, and Constantine gripped the top of his window’s frame with his left hand to steady himself while with his right hand he laid the muzzle of his submachinegun out the window. The wind whipped and roared through the car, now. No one said a word. In his mind, Constantine reviewed the highway they had been traveling. It had been miles since they had last seen a crossroad of any sort. He vaguely recalled an unpaved (“unimproved,” in the parlance) road, but he could not remember how far back that had been.

Chark was on his tablet, scrolling through satellite imagery of the route, giving their driver forewarning of upcoming bends. “Left five. Straight three hundred, then right six.” Mainly he did it out of habit, and good practice, but even at these speeds—fast for an old rust-bucket, if slow compared to the speeds at which they had trained—it was worthwhile to have the commentary, as the driver’s view ahead was limited by the two SUVs preceding them. “One hundred, then right two—”

A chopping screech of tires cut him off. The lead vehicles swerved and slowed, their drivers working for maximum brakes without locking the wheels and only partially succeeding. “Contact front,” the captain was saying over the radio. “Barricade.” Suddenly, a thunderous clatter of automatic

weapons filled the air ahead. Constantine tightened his grip on his door frame as his car swerved first one way and then the other, sliding to a hand-brake stop sideways in the road just short of Six-One's SUVs and the men piling out the near side of them.

"Saber, dismount!" ordered the captain over the radio. "Vik three is going to barricade left. Go for the woods. Flank left."

Constantine pushed open his door and slipped out, and then he reached back in and grabbed George, hauling him bodily from the car. Constantine was a man of wiry frame, but his size belied his strength. He had always held his own in the gym and in the field, and scrawny George may as well have been a paper mannequin. As Constantine pushed "the package" down behind the rear wheel of the car, he watched vik three, Five-Eight's SUV, roll past them into the shallow ditch to the left of Six-One's two trucks, bridging the gap between them and the tree-line. Its near-side doors were already ajar, and the rest of Five-Eight piled out even as it came to a stop, with their driver exiting last but only by a fraction of a second. It was still rocking on its suspension as they began to lay down fire under and around it, toward an enemy upon which Constantine still had not laid eyes.

"Chief, stand by to move," transmitted the captain.

Four-Four's trucks had already blasted past him on the right-hand side of the road, filling in that gap and, under Six-One's withering covering fire, pressing a few yards closer. The roar of assault rifles was constant, a symphony of staccato bursts from all around, but Constantine could hear the enemy's fire, even louder and more constant just beyond the hasty barricade, punctuated by heavy machinegun notes.

Technicals. He could also hear the singing timpani of bullets shredding his team's vehicles. "And no fucking air

support,” he could not help but note. Someone from Four-Four lit up an AW, a light machinegun, on the right side to counter the enemy’s heavy guns. That was something, at least.

“Smoke’s out. Chief, press left. My intent is to capture the technicals.”

“Capture?” Constantine transmitted back, incredulous.

“Capture. The main force is coming up behind us.”

“Fuck,” Constantine said but did not transmit. He had not yet fired a shot. Instead, he focused on keeping his left hand locked in a vice grip on George’s collar and the SMG in his right hand pointed in a safe direction. He used his feet to kick his men. “Left! Move!”

As he dragged George to the left, past the captain and their quickly disintegrating SUV, he could see thick white smoke billowing about the noses of several big military trucks on the road some fifty meters away. Someone had a good arm.

He slung his weapon and squeezed his push-to-talk. “Rapier, peel—”

“Grenade!” he heard someone shout through the din. A dull thump followed.

Constantine moved into the trees, shoved George down, and tried his transmission again.

“Rapier, on the run, left flank. Stay quiet and get behind that convoy. Snipers, we need to take those technicals in one piece. Report set.”

The rest of Five-Eight was going past him now at a sprint through the woods. He could see the two with their suppressed rifles bounding ahead, racing for a quartering angle not obstructed by smoke but also not so far aft that they would be firing back toward their own company’s vehicles.

The captain came up behind him. “I’ll take him. Go get those trucks, Rob.”

“Yes, sir. You got it. Mills has his phone.”

The captain stared at him for an extra half second and then said, "Roger. Go to it." Constantine nodded and took off after the rest of the team.

"One four, set."

"One five, set."

He caught up to the two sharpshooters and knelt down behind them just as they announced their readiness over the team's internal radio channel. "Stand by," he said. Each had set up against the side of a tree, bracing his rifle's handguard against the trunk. They had already divided the targets between them.

There came a wooden crackle around them, and another tree, off to their right, shed a burst of splinters. "Taking fire," said someone on the net.

"Roger," said the captain's voice. "Suppressed weapons, suppressed weapons only, open fire."

The two sharpshooters began firing. Their rifles coughed, making more noise with the clatter of their bolts than with the reports at the muzzles of their silencers. The tremendous racket of the firefight on the road continued, and even here next to them, Constantine could hardly discern the sounds of the suppressed weapons. The two enemy machinegunners went down quickly, the heavy machineguns falling silent. Their note subtracted from the overall cacophony was to Constantine like the lifting of a physical weight from his body.

"Technicals neutralized," he transmitted.

"Suppressed weapons only, continue to engage," replied the captain.

The two riflemen continued prosecuting targets. The one who had fired in their direction was down now as well, and most of the enemy still had not identified Five-Eight's flanking position in all the chaos. Constantine could see them clearly, now. Two open-bed trucks, each with a pintle-mounted

machinegun in the bed (earning them the “technical” moniker), and one five-ton troop carrier, open-topped. The enemy force was comprised of some twenty men, most of whom were now taking cover to the rear of the trucks and firing toward the Six-One’s and Four-Four’s barricade positions fifty meters up the road. The smoke screen was thinning out quickly, becoming more of a white haze drifting toward the friendly barricade on what little breeze the warm evening offered. It was already getting dark enough to limit Constantine’s vision—

He cursed himself and threw down his shades. Much better. The enemy was figuring it out, now, that there was a flanking element to their right. Advantages lasted only seconds. It was vital to continue shifting, changing the situation, keeping hold of the initiative. Enemy soldiers were moving around to the far sides of their vehicles and more and more were firing back at Constantine and his men in the trees.

“We’re blown,” he reported.

“All weapons, fire.”

The rest of Five-Eight opened up. Most of their weapons were in pistol calibers, but they made their share of noise and put out a lot of lead. The enemy recoiled as a group, completing in a hurry the process of taking cover out of sight on the far sides of their vehicles and returning fire as best they could. They were losing, now. Five-Eight and the rest of the company had them in a text-book ninety-degree crossfire. Now, for the company, it was a matter of completing the victory before they ran out of ammunition and time.

“Five-Eight, keep your fires aft of the technicals. Four-Four is moving up.” It was the captain again. He was coordinating with the Company Commander and the other Detachment Commanders on another net. The great challenge of an overmanned evolution was always to stay organized and out of conflict with one another. Most of the time Constantine,

and many like him, complained about the risk-aversion-born overmanning of operations, arguing that the excess personnel added more risk than they mitigated. Today, though, they were not overmanned. Today they had too many people, but also too many enemies. Today they were in a much, much bigger battle than any SF unit like theirs had faced, perhaps in their history.

Constantine was on his hands and knees, moving from shooter to shooter, making sure each of them had heard the restriction on fires and was anticipating a check-fire call, which Constantine knew could come at any moment.

“Alpha, stand by to advance.”

“Alpha standing by.”

Constantine slid down next to Alpha squad’s leader. “If you go in, keep right. Expect our covering fire down your left side until you reach the truck.”

“Got it.”

“Alpha, move up,” ordered the captain almost immediately. Four-Four must have stalled out. That was fine. Alpha squad was up and sprinting, their squad leader taking the left-most position and checking his men from accidentally running into the line of the covering fire that continued to stream through the air just to their left. Even weighed down by their gear, they covered the distance in only a few seconds.

“Bravo, move up! Alpha, take ‘em!” Constantine heard the captain’s voice through the air as well as the airwaves and looked around to see him catching up again at a run, waving at Constantine to go with the rest of the team. “Go!”

Constantine nodded and took off through the trees. Bravo was vaulting the ditch, and Alpha was rounding both ends of the big five-ton, a few in each direction, leading with a couple of their precious grenades. Constantine could not see what happened on the other side of that truck, but he could hear it, and he could imagine it, and it made his chest swell with

excitement. One of Bravo's men ahead of him took a running slide onto his side under the truck and joined in the carnage from there. Constantine grabbed another by the shoulder and shoved him toward one of the technicals. The latter took the hint instantly and vaulted into the bed of the truck.

"HOLD AT THE TRUCKS!" shouted the captain in their ears. "Do not pursue!"

One of Alpha's operators backed into view off to the right, between the five-ton and the nearer technical, tracking an unseen target and firing repeatedly. Constantine joined him in time to see an enemy soldier going for the heavy machinegun mounted on the farther truck. It was a desperate and futile effort in the midst of a slaughter. Meanwhile, Bravo's man took the near gun and had it up and running in a few seconds, adding its roar to the fray. It was obvious to all players why the captain did not want his men to pursue the now routed enemy survivors. Four-Four had come down the road from the right, and they had indeed stalled, but it left them in a perfect position to reap a horrid harvest of the fleeing enemy as they made for the woods on the far side of the road. Only a few enemy fighters managed to reach the trees, chased all the while by fire from almost two dozen small arms and one truck-mounted machinegun. "Cease fire!" shouted Constantine. "Cease fire! Drivers, get these trucks online! And someone get that other machinegun online! You!—" He grabbed one of Alpha's operators and shoved him toward the second technical. "Get on that gun!"

"Company, consolidating from the west," said the captain in their ears. "Get a head-count and get these vehicles working. Cutlass has security."

"On it, sir."

“Rob!” Constantine heard the captain calling his name as he came to rejoin the group. “Can I give this back to you?” He all but threw George into Constantine’s grasp.

“Yeah, I got ‘im.”

“And this?” He indicated the situation more broadly. “I’m gonna go talk to zero-one real quick.”

“Yeah, we’re on it.”

One of the company’s original SUVs came rolling past the captured trucks to park behind them, followed by another, both riddled with holes but, miraculously, functional— notwithstanding the steady trickle of steam escaping from under the hood of the second.

“Fuel leak,” shouted a voice from under the five-ton.

“I got’cha,” said another man, diving under with a roll of all-purpose tape. The ideal repair? Perhaps not. But these trucks only had to carry them a few hours farther.

There was a sudden buzz, and Constantine looked to see Four-Four’s drone launching into the air.

He passed his gaze over the local battlefield and took a few deep breaths. Focus. “Squad leaders, headcount,” he shouted. “And everybody fuckin’ check yourself for holes.”

“Chief, Rosa’s hit!”

There was the unwelcome shiver for which he had been waiting. Constantine hurried over to find the wounded man seated on the tailgate of one of the technicals while a second man provided first-aid.

“I’m fine, chief. Arm wound.”

“Extremity bleed,” said the other operator, even now cranking down the tourniquet’s windlass just below Rosa’s shoulder.

“Turn him over to the medic and get back to work loading up,” ordered Constantine.

“I’m here,” said the squad’s medical specialist as he arrived. “I got ‘im. Go,” he added, slapping his comrade on the shoulder.

Constantine turned his attention to the pile of dead bodies in the lee of the five-ton. What a mess, but they seemed to be “indigs,” indigenous local soldiers, rather than enemy foreign operators as he had earlier feared.

With a roar, two more trucks rounded into view from the west, followed by several others in trail.

“CONTACT!” bellowed someone, but the two heavy machineguns spoke louder, greeting the newcomers with long streams of deafening fire.

They received for every round they delivered. A terrifying hail of machinegun fire pelted the captured vehicles, driving the entire company into cover behind them or into the trees.

“Rapier, we gotta get these viks going!” shouted the captain into his radio. “Company will cover us! Rob, take care of the package!”

“RPG!” someone howled. Constantine tackled George to the ground and heard the hiss of the rocket. Sometimes, tachypsychia blessed a man with a slow-motion perception in moments like these, but not this time. This time, it all seemed to happen too quickly. He heard the hiss of the rocket, and less than a heartbeat later its warhead struck the nearer technical with a concussion that made Constantine’s ears ring. There was no fireball, and the truck did not fly into the air or do anything else so dramatic. It simply burst with a singular crash like a five-hundred-mile-per-hour car wreck.

Constantine cleared his head and looked around just in time to see two of the enemy’s heavy trucks lurch into the weeds on his side of the road, blowing past the ruined technical and coming to a stop only a few yards away. Now came the sense of time dilation. He saw with exquisite detail, as if over

a span of minutes, the trucks grinding to a stop, their wheels sliding the last few inches. The bulk of each rocked backward as it settled on its suspension, expending its momentum, and the people inside did likewise. More than any of that, though, he saw the barrels of the guns training down at him, including the half-inch bore of yet another mounted machinegun. It seemed forever had elapsed by the time he was able to throw his body under the half-ton and pulled George with him. He felt as though he could have counted the shots fired by the machinegun behind him.

“Go!” he shouted, continuing to pull his hapless charge after him as he crawled out from under the far side of the five-ton over the bodies of the dead which his own team had made there. This was still a killing field, only now inhabited by his own people, fighting desperately to prevent the enemy from enclosing them amongst these trucks and wiping them out. Aggression was their only hope, and it was a slender hope indeed, in the face of superior numbers and superior firepower. Constantine could see his men, and those of Four-Four and Six-One, draining their rifles, refusing to duck down even as the return fire literally consumed their cover. He could see them dropping. He had to get the package out of here.

That was the mission.

Pushing himself across the dead and pulling George along with him like a sack, he reached the far side of the road. With the field of battle now reversed, the south side of the road was the company’s left flank, and it was mercifully still defended. Some clever soul had delivered another grenade, this time a frag grenade, into the attacking vehicles on this side, wrecking one and stalling the rest, preventing them from rushing and collapsing this flank like they had the right.

“Right side! Right side!” Constantine roared, grabbing all who came within his reach to capture their attention. On the

other side of the dead five-ton, two trucks' worth of enemy infantry were pouring forth. More grenades flew—from friendly hands—and skittered under the five-ton, detonating by the newly-arrived enemy. That would learn 'em. He crossed the ditch and with one hand threw George into the woods, following after him like a bulldozer for several seconds more until they were out of the maelstrom.

The chatter on his radio headset was telling. Chaos. Calls for help. Transmissions cut off by cries of pain. And that just on one team's net. Constantine understood this sound, knew it for what it was: a defeat in progress. For all their aggression, they were too few, and too poorly armed to handle... God, what? A hundred man opposing force? And fully equipped, to boot. His men were all going to die.

They would never quit, but that would not save them from the inevitable.

Constantine let loose a stream of profanity that did not accomplish much, and then he began pulling his kit apart. "George—George!" he shouted, grabbing the man and shaking him to bring him back to the moment.

George stared at him from the depths of shell-shock.

"George, listen to me: you're going to have to go on your own. I'm going to give you a radio and my tablet—look!" He took George's head and forced him to look at the tablet he had detached from his chest. "You just have to go west. Follow this line. Stay away from the main roads and people, go through the woods—"

"I can't go alone!"

"You fucking can," replied Constantine, cuffing him hard across the face. "You fucking can and you will. You'll follow this line until you reach this spot on the coast. When you get close—within twenty miles—you turn this radio to channel

three and you call for help. They will come and get you, I promise.”

“You must come with me! You must protect me!”

Constantine took him by the throat, now, and pulled him close, nose to nose. “I am not going to leave my men to die,” he growled. “You can go to the ship alone, or you can take your chances with the people hunting you. Clear?”

It was all perfectly clear. Unacceptable. Unthinkable, even. But perfectly clear.

Constantine threw him down. “Go!” He turned then and waded back into the firefight.

Not stupidly, though. He could hear shooting from the epicenter on the road, but he could hear more shooting in the trees off to the west. Hopefully that was one of the other friendly fire-teams, in an outside position. If it was, he would join them and start a push on the enemy convoy. If it was not—if that was enemy fire—then he would attack them from behind.

The trees did not tear at him. Trees were generally forgiving. It was the brambles, the low thorny underbrush, that clawed at his legs as he ran. He ignored them, plowing through, double-checking the status of his weapon as he ran. He had not yet fired a shot. “Fucking George,” he thought.

Friendlylies. Six-One. “Coming up on your six!” he called as he approached. “Chris!”

“Rob? What the fuck?” replied Six-One’s senior warrant officer upon seeing him.

“My guys are getting eaten alive in there, Chris.”

“My guys are getting eaten alive out here. There’s too fuckin’ many of these guys.”

Constantine could see the killing field now from the outside perspective. Trucks littered the road, several stalled nearby, the rest in a cluster where his team had originally taken

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the five-ton and the two technicals. A couple were on fire. Trucks littered the road, but bodies littered the road and the grass and the woods around him.

“We have to charge ‘em.”

“What?”

“We gotta rush ‘em,” Constantine insisted. “We gotta take those trucks now or we’re all dead.”

“I got maybe six guys left!”

“Seven with me! Chris, we gotta do this now!”

“RPG!” screamed a nearby voice.

It came right in amongst them and laid all the world to silence.

For a long time Constantine was still. At least, he thought it a long time. He wondered if he was dead. There was no pain, and he felt very disconnected from himself, as if he was floating over his own body, or viewing the world as from behind a clear veil.

He was out of the trees, at the edge of the road. That was a change. Had he been thrown out? How long had he been here? Was the battle over? Off to his right were the trucks. Another five-ton, this one covered, and an armored 4x4 with a machinegun turret. There were people there. They seemed to be shooting, occasionally, but no one seemed to be in a hurry. They were all very serene—or else he was very serene, way over here, on the other side of this veil. He watched as the armored truck’s turret rotated toward him. If his body was not dead, that would certainly finish him off in a moment. He found himself looking at the sky. Perhaps he did not want to see it coming, or perhaps it just struck him as strange, that something like this would happen on a beautiful, warm evening, by the last light of the setting sun. Sure, he had been a bit bitter about this place, but now that all of his troubles were

about to be behind him forever, what was the point in holding a grudge? It was going to be a nice night.

The other possibility was that he was distracted by that drone again, hovering over the battle. Something struck the enemy machinegunner and caused several fine, red clouds to spring from him. The turret stalled. More invisible projectiles peppered the covered truck and the men around it. AP rounds. Constantine could see them—well, not them, not the projectiles, but he could see their effects as they penetrated completely through people and vehicles in perfectly straight lines. Where they passed through metal, showers of sparks exited the far side. He had never seen spark trails like that, so long and straight in the air.

It was amazing to watch, and Constantine realized he was on his feet, staring in wonder. He looked for the source. Had Four-Four managed to swing all the way around the north side? Did they have an automatic with AP? He searched into the woods across the road with his eyes, but he saw no one and no muzzle flash.

An indistinct shape moved in the twilight, against the backdrop of the trees, and Constantine became convinced he was dead, for it surely was a ghost, or a devil. Then a flash of light knocked him off his feet again.

The impact served to bring him back to his senses. “Holy fuck!” he observed, lifting his head just in time to see the covered five-ton—the new one, the enemy-occupied one—crashing to the ground like a felled tree after having stood for a moment on its nose. A great portion of its rear end was caved in and twisted into wreckage. The people who had been taking shelter by it were no longer visible.

Constantine pushed himself up. There was the armored truck, and its turret. He sprinted toward it. There were people inside, but one of the doors was ajar. He pulled it open and

fired a burst from his submachinegun into each of its occupants. Then he clambered atop it, grabbed the dead man in the turret, and deadlifted him free, tossing him off the hull of the vehicle. The gun looked to be in working order. He slid himself down into the firing position and swung the gun around, searching for targets. He found them.

“Fuck all ‘y’all,” he said to himself as he mowed them down.

That made the difference, that and his share of luck. A lot of rounds were fired his way, but most of them hit the armor plates that surrounded the gun, and when he finally ran out of targets, Constantine discovered that he was still alive after all. At that point, with no one left to shoot, and the sound of gunfire reduced to a few sporadic bursts, he sagged back against the turret frame and let himself look to the sky again. It was fully night, now.

“Rob? That you?”

“Yeah,” he said as best he could to the stars above.

“Fuckin’ A, Rob. Nice work.”

“Did we win?” He looked down. It was Six-One’s captain. He looked up at the sky again.

“Well, we’re alive. They ain’t.”

“How many’d we lose?”

“We’re still getting a count. Get down from there. You need to get a medic to look you over, and your team is going to need you.”

That drew Constantine’s attention. He locked eyes with the young officer and made the connection. “All right,” he said, and he began the laborious journey back to earth. “Fuck.”

The captain helped him down, steadied him, and looked him over. “You’re wounded.”

“Great.”

“Get patched up and get to your boys.”

“Yeah.”

He eventually reunited with what was left of Five-Eight. They numbered five in all, of the original twelve, and he was now their ranking officer. Constantine’s wounds were serious but not immediately life-threatening, according to the medic. He had first- and second-degree burns on the exposed skin of his face, neck, and hands (“Looks like you got some sun, there, Chief,” joked the medic), and some puncture wounds from frag, including a needle-fine one through his gut, but his plate had caught the few that would have gone through his heart and lungs. His men put him on the back of a truck and made him lie still while he directed their work.

In all, they managed to recover one five-ton and the armored gun-truck. It was more than enough for those who remained. They loaded up the dead and then then the wounded, and then those who could still walk climbed aboard. The two vehicles set forth, heading west once more toward their promised extraction. In the back of the five-ton, where the only living were the wounded and the medics, no one spoke. It did not seem the time, outnumbered as they were by their own losses. Constantine was shaking and beginning to feel cold. That would be shock, the symptoms of insufficient blood in his veins. He had a bleed somewhere, probably in his gut. He thought about letting the docs know, but they were busy trying to keep stable a man who was missing much of his face, and that seemed to him a more pressing concern.

The truck lurched to a stop, brakes squealing. “Now what?” snapped Constantine aloud. Everything was still for a little while, and someone called for a medic. In due time, several figures appeared at the back of the truck and hoisted a new body in. Constantine recognized his clothing. “What the fuck? George?”

“Found him lying in the road. Almost ran him the fuck over.”

“Is he alive?”

“Yeah, but he’s not going to make it.”

“George,” said Constantine, sliding himself down to the floor of the truck next to his erstwhile charge. “George, can you hear me? What the fuck happened? I told you to run.”

His efforts at conversation were in vain. George was not lucid. The wound was a bad one. When had that happened? After Constantine had left him? Or had he been wounded during their first escape, and had Constantine simply failed to notice in his rage?

“Did you see them?” George managed suddenly, in little more than a whisper. Constantine looked to find the man staring at him with those wide, fearful eyes.

Visions of a wraith returned to Constantine’s mind, crystal clear yet nonsensical. “I saw something,” he admitted. George was breathing hard, now, and took hold of Constantine’s arm with his hand. “What are they?” Constantine asked.

“From the stars,” said George. Of course, thought Constantine. George’s grip tightened, and he lifted his head off the bed of the truck. “They are enemy!” he whispered. “They are making—” He coughed. “—alliance.”

“George, you can’t expect me to believe that.” Visions of a white hot flash, and of ten tons of steel standing on end, returned to his mind’s eye, also crystal clear, also nonsensical. “Fuckin’ aliens?”

George groaned, straining harder, pulling Constantine down to him. “Stop them. Tell the world.”

That was all the strength he had. He did not collapse and give up the mortal coil right then, but he sank down to the floor, rasping, struggling to breathe. And Constantine had little left to offer of his own.

“He say anything useful, Chief?” one of the docs was asking. Constantine wanted to answer, but he found that he was very tired, and it would have to wait.

He became aware of the sea breeze, and that the truck had stopped. Several hours had evidently passed away from him, but the breeze was good. That was good news. He became conscious again on the boat. The steady, galloping bounce of the inflatable over the waves, and the noise of its engine, made sleep impossible. He would later recall vaguely being hoisted up the curved side of the submarine, but he could not claim to have been really conscious for it. His next genuine experience of the living world was in a sick-bay deep inside the ship. That was where he learned that his surgery had been successful, and that he could expect not only to survive but to enjoy a quick recovery to full fitness, as long as he was careful for a week or two about the stitches in his stomach.

That was also where he learned that George had died a full hour before they had reached the beach, and where he learned the final count of the dead, and of those so wounded that they would never fight again. Ordinarily, an Army team aboard the undersea home of a Naval special operations unit could expect plenty of testosterone-fueled rivalry, but this voyage was quiet. There was nothing to say, and nothing Constantine wanted to share.

Chapter 4

She awoke the next morning when he gently disentangled from her.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” she said.

He proceeded to the door and thence to the bathroom, still in his boxers and t-shirt. Melody realized, as she watched him go, that she had never felt truly, sexually attracted to a man before him. It was a powerful feeling. It made her hot from head to toe, among other strange sensations. That is, not strange in the sense that she had never felt sexual arousal before; just strange in that suddenly it had all this context. Strange in that she had never had the hots for her own boyfriend before. This was the sort of thing those terrible shows were always depicting, that some part of her had assumed never happened in real life.

Melody sat bolt upright as memory of the night before came flooding back. Her hair fell over her face, and she pushed it back out of the way. She stood, hugged her pillow and

blanket to her, and shuffled bleary-eyed back toward her bedroom. Passing the bathroom door, she could hear the sound of him urinating, and it occurred to her that men pee standing up. Again, it was not that she had not known it before. Of course she knew that they did. Just, this was the first time she had ever thought about it in a real, material context. A personal context. It was strange to think about her boyfriend—

Melody slapped herself on the face with both hands and then shut the door. “Get a grip, girlfriend. God.”

What remained of their visit passed in peace and uneventfully. Nothing more was heard over those remaining two days of who, or what, it might have been that haunted their property that night, and they all concluded that it must have been some sicko playing a sick sicko joke on them. Who, and why, they could hardly guess, but that was the only explanation.

If Doran noticed, during those two days, Melody acting toward him just a bit more coyly than normal, or caught her eyeing him a bit more often or somewhat differently than she might have in the past, he never let on. When he dropped her off at her apartment, he said, “I had a great time. You know, aside from that one thing.”

“Yeah. I did too,” she replied. “I’m glad you were able to come. My parents loved you.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment. And, hopefully, a, uh... wha’d’ya call it. An endorsement.”

“Yeah. Consider it an endorsement.”

“Good. When do you want to get together again?”

That was the question. “Uh, I think we should stick to the plan. You find us a gym, and I’ll find us a drone.”

“It’s a deal. Talk to you tonight!”

“Okay!”

“Bye, lover,” he said.

She gaped, and he laughed and peeled away. “We didn’t even do anything!” she wanted to shout, and it was true. Neither that night, nor the following nights. Except in her imagination, a few times. Melody felt herself blushing furiously and stormed inside. There was work to do. She had what was left of this weekend to catch up on homework, plus there was the project, which had been running for two weeks and should now have gathered significant data—both the for-credit school-project aspect and the... other... aspect. She needed to talk to Cookie about that other aspect. And on that note, she had not managed to get into the game once during her visit to her parents, even though her laptop was perfectly capable of gaming. There had been no opportunity. She had seen some email traffic about a team meeting online which she had not attended, so she would have to find out what that was about.

The remains of that day and the better part of the next Melody spent catching up on school material. Her homework was relatively minor, and the distributed neural net project was ticking along. With everyone on holiday, they had left it to process some preset batches of training and test data, which it had long ago completed, and automated scripts in conjunction with her “Consciousness Layer” had recorded the results and saved them for analysis. Most of the team would not be back to work until Monday morning, so Melody gave that data collection the barest skimming over. It could wait. What interested her far more was the other stream of data her Consciousness Layer had been recording, and what people made of it. However, to see where stood that side of the project she needed a dark web browser, which she had recently downloaded but didn’t know the first thing about using, and a username and password, which she did not yet have. Cookie

had set all that up for her. She had no emails from him, but it was Saturday night, so with any luck he would be online.

With a few clicks, Melody launched the stand-alone VOIP client and logged into the team's server, noting that only Nailoo and Beetle were connected. Then she launched the game—of course, one did not just launch a game, anymore. One launched a “digital distribution and rights-management platform,” a piece of software like an app-store app provided by the game's publisher (in this case DigitalArts Corporation's “GameSource”), through which one could then purchase games, manage one's library of purchased games, receive lots of advertisements for new games and premium downloadable content, and—if one was very clever—launch and play a game one had already purchased. Melody's primary gaming system was a carefully designed chipper-shredder, built not only to consume the complex code of the day's most advanced and demanding videogames and spit forth smooth, pure streams of entertainment joy, but also to reduce corporate inconveniences to inoffensive pulp through its sheer excess of power. Multiple solid-state hard disk drives flicked the “GameSource” software into existence, and an elite-tier fiber-optic Internet connection made quick work of mandatory software updates—first a mandatory update to GameSource itself, which then had to be restarted before it would allow her to download and install updates to her games which were also required before those games would launch. She noticed something peculiar during this process, but so minor that it did not more than register subconsciously before she had clicked on the relevant button and her lightning-fast machine had made the idea of DigitalArts Corporation's massively successful hero-based online first-person-shooter, “Guardians,” a reality upon her screen and through her speakers. She put on her headphones as the game loaded its main menu.

“Anyone on?” she transmitted.

“Hey, Mal,” said Beetle’s barely pubescent voice. She noted immediately that his tone was subdued.

“Mal,” said Nailoo.

“What’s up, guys?”

“Mal, I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.”

Melody furrowed her brow. This was strange, to say the least. She did not associate her online gaming friends with bad news. She associated them with her escape from bad news. Videogames didn’t have bad news.

“Okay. What’s wrong?”

“Cookie passed away.”

Melody stared at her screen. A cheerful looking Midge posed with her flame-thrower while a text box pulsed, “Waiting for invite...”

“What?” she said at last.

“He passed away this week. Tuesday, I guess. I talked to his family. Apparently he overdosed on insulin.”

Melody sat back in her chair, her mouth hanging open. It didn’t even compute. In the way that videogames did not have bad news, Internet friends did not die of insulin overdoses. She had been vaguely aware that Cookie was diabetic, but she had never met any of these people “IRL”—In Real Life—and she had to admit that in a way she did not think of them as real people.

That was a terrible way to say it. Obviously they were real people. But they were not people whose Real Lives were a present reality in her own Real Life. They were distant and remote. She interacted with them solely in the context of Guardians. Beetle was a boy of fourteen or fifteen, so she forgave his immaturity. Ninjas was an undergrad. Daitetsu was quiet, and she didn’t know much about him but that he was a bit older and had some kind of job during the week. M was her

age, but lived with his parents. Nailoo was the eldest and a long-time gamer. He was married with children and a career, but his hobby was being the leader of their little Guardians team. And Cookie was an adult, just out of college if her memory served, and he was diabetic. Had been. And apparently he had died on Tuesday of a mismanaged insulin application.

“They held the funeral today,” Nailoo continued. “I ordered flowers from all of us, with our handles. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah,” said Melody. “Yeah, that’s fine. Good. I’m glad you did. I can’t believe this is real.”

“I know. It’s hard to believe he’s really gone.”

She sat forward in her chair, elbows on her knees and her hands at her mouth, staring at her screen but not really seeing it. A clutching sensation built in her chest, and her eyes began to feel hot. “Is everyone okay?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. This isn’t the first friend I’ve lost. It’s just sad.”

“Beetle? How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“It’s okay if you want to talk about it,” said Nailoo. “Any time.”

“I’m really okay. I didn’t even know him that much.”

Melody wondered how that would feel, to be fifteen years old and find out that one of your online friends had died of diabetes. She was not even sure how she felt. Sad, yes, but also bewildered and shocked. It occurred to her that while they were having their scare Wednesday night at her parents’ house, Cookie had already been dead for a day. Surreal was the word for it.

“The others have already heard. I got them on Thursday night for a meeting. They’re not on tonight, but they’ve been in and out. The team’s not going anywhere.”

“Okay,” she said. Processing... Processing... said her inner mental hardware, a little circle on her inner monitor going ‘round and ‘round and ‘round....

After several long, quiet seconds, Nailoo said, “Beetle and I have been poaning newbs in his memory. You want to join us for a few rounds, Mal? I think he’d like that.”

“Yeah, all right. I could shoot some people in the face.”

That night, being a party of only three and matched with four random strangers to make a team, and thus having no hope of coordinating sophisticated team tactics, they just played for kills. That night, 0x00_Malady alternated with b33tle53x for top kill-count game to game, Melody demonstrating such a bloodletting that even Beetle spoke profanities of appreciation when the post-match “Play of the Game” replays highlighted the ruthless efficiency of her killstreaks. (Raiza’s “ult,” or ultimate power, was particularly vicious: Once fully charged, which as with most ults occurred only once or twice per round, it could be activated, allowing her for the next few seconds to teleport through enemies in her path, killing them instantly. Melody’s aim and timing were on, and more than once she managed to obliterate the majority of an opposing team with three perfectly aligned transits.) Nailoo, his heart not quite in it, still routinely occupied the third spot on the boards, and together they cut a swath of carnage across public servers far and wide.

When she finally bade them good night—“Good night, Mal. Good game,” said Beetle, a rare token of acknowledgement from the youngster—and closed Guardians, she found herself looking at the GameSource window still open in the background. It was then that she noticed properly

the oddity she had registered only subconsciously before: She had a message in her GameSource inbox. GameSource, like other digital distribution apps, had built-in contact list and messaging functions to encourage users to make themselves at home in that publisher's product network. Most gamers ignored these features, using the distro app as necessary to buy the game but using other platforms to manage contacts, form teams, and communicate with their friends. As such, Melody could not remember ever receiving a message from another user through GameSource. She clicked on the envelope icon, which took her to her inbox.

New message from ##OneTrueCookie##, it said.

Melody felt herself choking up as she clicked on it.

It contained only a URL (a web address)—<https://m1hgs75lsc0p0trse26me.onion/i8ht3mr012>— and two long strings of apparently random characters.

She blinked.

Well, if this was what she thought it was, then he expected her to be able to make it work with just this information, so she decided she might as well give it a try. She closed the VOIP app and a few other programs and then installed and ran the Tor browser he had recommended to her (which was hilariously called NoLeek). Lo and behold, it appeared as a normal web browser. Melody copied the address into it and struck her Enter key. After a brief moment, it loaded a page that was blank aside from two text entry boxes, one labeled "User" and the other labeled "Token," and a button labeled "Go." She pasted in the two seemingly random strings of text from Cookie's message in order and clicked the button.

After another moment, she was shown a file repository, with several compressed folder archives awaiting download along with a text file called README.

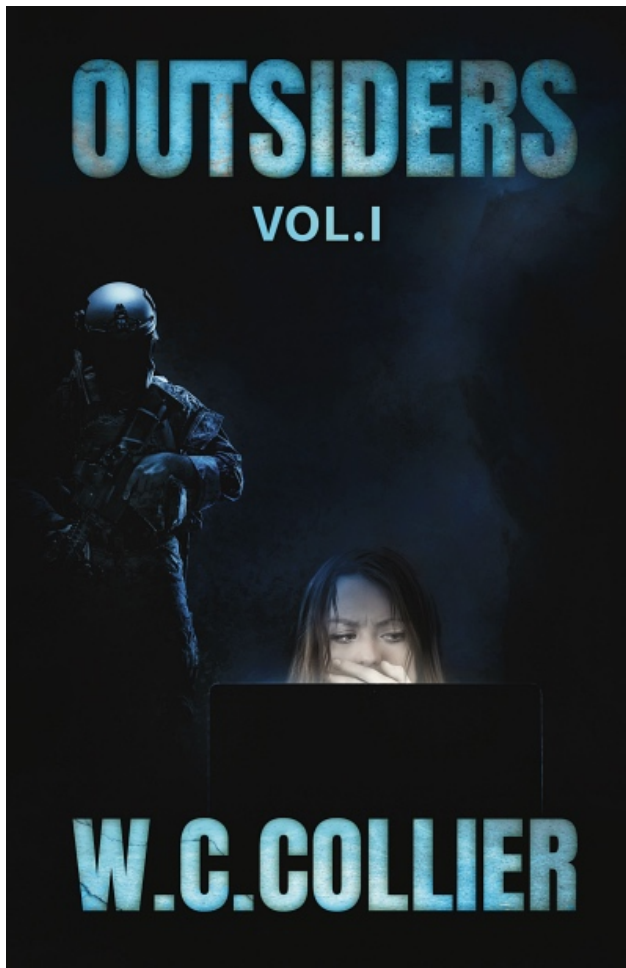
It was her habit to read README files, so she read it.

“Mal,” it said. “It looks like we may have got onto something big. Someone wiped our .onion site, but I was taking regular backups, and I uploaded the latest snapshot of our take and the community’s comments here. I’m going to take some steps to cover our tracks, just in case. You should be fine, but be careful with this info. We haven’t done anything illegal, but if it’s some kind of corporate project, or a government thing, ours or someone else’s, they could make trouble for you. If you’re reading this, you’re using a Tor browser, so you should be fine. The token is single-use, so download everything. I only skimmed over the data, but it’s pretty mind-blowing. You’ll see.”

Melody sat before her computer, breathing hard, her body shaking. The claws of terror pierced her chest like a raptor’s talons, closing in on her heart. Only for the barest second did she consider that this could all be coincidence. It could be. She wanted it to be. But no part of her believed it was, because she had already seen a piece of what the virtual mind had collected, and that had been astounding enough to incite her and her team to put together this anonymous project with Cookie’s help, something of which she would never have envisioned herself being a part. Now Cookie was dead—from a catastrophic insulin overdose—and creepy figures were skulking around her parents’ back yard—just when she happened to be staying over.

The monstrous aspect of that nighttime visitation had mostly faded in her mind. Certainly an illusion it had been, a misperception heightened by the hour, the light, and the unexpectedness of the encounter. But that determination only made a conspiracy all the more likely. A ghost would have nothing to do with this stuff with Cookie and the neural net project, but a man? A man could be part of a conspiracy.

Three ordinary events occurring in proximity was a coincidence. That was apophenia, the clustering illusion, the bias of the human mind toward the presumption of patterns. Three extraordinary events, though? An extraordinarily rare and tragic death, a stalking, and a computer science discovery of historic proportions, all occurring within a week? No, four events: There was also the mysterious deletion of their crowd-sourced analysis site, just before Cookie's death. It could be a coincidence, but it wasn't. This was a conspiracy. And someone had killed Cookie over it, already.



When the government and military conspire to conceal what she and her classmates discovered, a shy student and her boyfriend work to reveal it to the world: an impossible intelligence embedded in the fabric of the Internet.

OUTSIDERS: Vol. I

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