

Melody is alive, but most of her allies are scattered, and her one remaining hope to save her world is deep in enemy territory. There is no choice: she must go. A final mission, a final battle, a final stand. The end of the world.

OUTSIDERS: Vol. III

By W. C. Collier

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OUTSIDERS

VOL. III



W.C. COLLIER

Outsiders Vol. III

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Chapter 82

It is one of those peculiarities of military air travel that, in a cargo aircraft, one often sits with one's back to the side bulkhead, facing perpendicular to the aircraft's direction of travel, such that as it accelerates or decelerates, one is thrown sideways into one's neighbor. It was one of the peculiarities of Melody's life that she had first experienced that phenomenon in an alien vessel, and at least that aspect of her first ride in a domestic military cargo plane was not so novel. The pilots applied the brakes, and she grabbed the seat netting over her shoulder as the aircraft's deceleration shoved her against Lars's shoulder.

There had been no conversation during the flight. The cargo bay of the plane was much too loud, such that they had advised her to wear earplugs. Thus had Melody passed the several hours' flight in this eerie, empty belly, lined along both sides with a jumble of nets, folded structures, ladders, tools, and mysterious markings and numbers, all lit in a dim, pale green light and filled with the drowning drone of engines made

distant by the foam plugs filling her ears. Her experience of it was surreal and ghostly, as if she was riding along in someone else's body. At least she was warm enough. During the flight, the air in the bay had grown cold and crisp, but all of them were dressed in dry-suits over thermal long underwear.

The dry-suit was a thoroughly new experience for her, a rugged jumpsuit made of something like vinyl, complete with integrated booties, strong rubber cuffs which sealed around her wrists, and a similar rubber collar so narrow that she had only managed with help to get her head through it, and which thereafter clung about her neck so tightly that for the first little while it had felt as if it was threatening to choke her, though it never did. By now, she had forgotten about it. The thermal underwear they had provided was warm enough inside this airtight plastic bag that just the process of boarding the plane with her luggage had been enough to make her break out in a sweat. (Where they were going, she had been told, the weather was warm, but the water was still quite chilly.) Once the air in the plane had cooled, though, she had found herself comfortable overall, and particularly grateful for the warm gloves and socks they had given her for her extremities. The worst part of being cold, to her mind, was that rubbery, icy feeling of frozen fingers and toes.

As it was, her greatest discomfort by the time they had landed was the pain in her legs from sitting on a seat that was little more than a nylon net stretched across an aluminum frame. She desperately wanted to stand up and relieve her muscles, and it seemed to take a very long time for the aircraft to taxi to a stop. While it was still rolling, the lights went out and she saw the rear ramp crack open and begin to lower, revealing the pitch-black night outside. Warm air flooded in, relieving the chill of her face. As the ramp opened, the roar of the engines swelled a little, but that was still well-muted by her

earplugs. Around her, the others began donning their helmets and lowering their night-vision devices and ear-cups, so she did the same. Her NODs rendered the world in bright shades of gray to which she now was well-accustomed after her forced march across the countryside of only a week prior. So much of this had become familiar so quickly, out of necessity, that it made her feel all the more like a ghost in a stranger's body, a stranger's life.

When they stood, she stood—before the aircraft had completely stopped rolling, which also felt very strange after a lifetime of commercial flights and their attendant instructions to the contrary. While she was picking up her bags, the aircraft made a very sharp turn, seemingly pivoting about one of its wheels, and she grabbed the netting again to steady herself until it straightened out and stopped with a bump of seizing brakes. The men shouldered their bags and Lars—she was beginning to be able to tell them apart, even in all this kit and with their faces hidden behind the projecting tubes of their night-vision goggles—watched her, making sure she had everything and was steady before giving her a thumbs-up. She returned the gesture, and he waved for her to follow the others, who were already walking toward the rear ramp. There was still no point in trying to talk over the loud hum of the engines.

The ramp finished lowering and they marched down onto the dark tarmac—or rather, the tarmac which would have been dark to the unaided eye. To her vision, the whole airport was laid out before her, a gray lot of asphalt and beyond that a black field bespangled with lights small and large, under a sky filled with ten times or a hundred times the normal density of stars. Melody saw another soldier standing off to one side, in more traditional military dress, rifle in hand, keeping watch through his own NODs, and aircrew pulling a few trunks of cargo off the ramp behind her. Ahead, not very far away, was a

helicopter, its dark form squatting low on the tarmac. She could not see its spinning rotors, but the paths of its blade tips appeared to her to be traced in white fire. A thin ring of light outlined the invisible disk of the main rotor, and another, smaller ring stood vertical beside the helicopter's tail fin. Melody stared at the sight, so taken aback that for a moment she forgot to walk, until Lars gave her a gentle bump from behind. She started forward again, hurrying after Yates and Pete, who were marching like silent figures through this wild lightscape. The droning roar of the cargo plane melded into the very different but just as overwhelming droning roar of the helicopter.

Melody glanced back. The cargo plane towered behind her, a dark silhouette blotting out the lights of the airfield in that direction.

That was the other thing that made it all so strange, she realized: there were lights everywhere except on the aircraft themselves. There were no lights on the wingtips, no lights on the tail, and certainly no bright landing or taxi lights illuminating the tarmac in front of its nose. Likewise, there were no running lights of any kind on the helicopter. The only light it made was by the seemingly supernatural blaze tracing the flight of its blade tips. She tilted her head away, looking past the rim of her NODs to see if that fire was visible to the naked eye, and it was, but so very faintly that she might not have noticed it had she not known to look for it. Through her goggles, meanwhile, it was stunning.

Another man stood just outside the rotor arc and gestured for them to proceed to him and then, from him, toward the helicopter. Perpendicular, she noted, just like the Penguin. Approach from the side. The aircrewman directing them was wearing armor and night-vision goggles of his own, though his helmet was of that classic flight-helmet design, more round and

covering the whole of the head. He had a microphone at his mouth, and she saw a cable trailing from him all the way to the helicopter's open side door. He was saying something, though she could not hear what. He looked down at her and gave her a nod and a wave to continue. Melody ducked her head and passed under the rim of sizzling white light, jogging to the open door. As she went, she glanced to the left and saw through a window the silhouette of the pilot on the near side of the helicopter cockpit. He too was wearing a large flight helmet with night-vision mounted. He glanced over at her and then went back to whatever he was doing. Ahead, Pete and Yates were already aboard and strapping themselves into seats, and another aircrewman there took her bag and pulled her by the arm up into the helicopter's interior, such as it was. There was only enough vertical space for her to stand bent over, her head-gear knocking against the ceiling and against a tubular metal bar mounted to the ceiling across the width of the cabin. With the sliding door wide open, and forward of that the windows open with a machinegun mounted on the sill of each, the interior of the helicopter felt even more than the cargo bay of the airplane as though it were but a thin shell or frame, a minimal structure just sufficient to stow cargo, even if the cargo was people. The seats were minimal, too, and in a similar style to that of the plane, being in this case thin fabric stretched taught over metal bars. The aircrewman directed her to hers, and once she was seated he took the liberty of pulling out the straps of her restraint harness, plugging them into the round hub of the buckle in front of her, and then pulling out their slack so that the buckle rested tight against her chest.

It took only a few seconds more for Lars to board and find his seat, while the aircrewmen convened and secured the last of the cargo, including the hard plastic cases which had come off the plane with them. The last of the crew climbed in, and a

moment later the helicopter began to roll. She had never really thought of a helicopter rolling, but of course it would, if it had wheels, as this one did. She saw the asphalt and lights outside the still wide-open door begin to slide past, and then to swing around them quickly as the helicopter made a turn on the ground and proceeded out toward the runways. At last the aircrewman by the door slid it shut and latched it, and then he moved past her, through the tight confines of the compartment, to his seat at his window and its machinegun. Melody looked out through the windows at the bright (to her goggles) rows of lights marking the runways, and something in her must have made the assumption that a helicopter taxiing on its wheels would taxi to a runway for take-off, like an airplane, because she was very surprised when at that moment the aircraft, only just reaching the taxiway, leapt off the ground, pressing her into her seat as it did and the lights outside dropped away. Then the world tilted, the helicopter dipping its nose and accelerating, and it occurred to her that she was facing backwards, and that facing aft in an aircraft was just as strange in its way as facing sideways, though not so awkward. The force of acceleration pressed her against her harness, as though trying to throw her out of her chair, but it did not pile her onto her neighbor. Then came a shudder which rattled the whole airframe as if something had come unbalanced in the rotors, causing her to grab hold of her seat in fright, but the shudder passed, the roar of the rotors faded a little, and the world of lights fell away as her chariot climbed into the night sky.

Melody took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to release her jitters. What a strange symphony of new sights, sounds, and sensations, such as she would never in a million years have imagined, much less have expected herself ever to experience. The helicopter raced across the dark landscape, and as it settled into its cruise, the aircrewman by the window near her turned

and began sorting through some cables hanging from the very low ceiling. He reached over to her, fished out a lead hanging from her headset, checked the end, and then retrieved an adapter and connected her to the helicopter's intercom system.

"ICS check," she heard his voice say in her ear, thin and compressed. "Give me a thumbs-up if you can hear."

She gave him the sign.

He held up the connector by which he had hooked her into his system and showed her the button on it. "Squeeze that to talk."

Melody pulled down her microphone and squeezed the button. "Test test."

"You're going to have to kiss your mic," he said, pressing his own microphone to his lips in demonstration. She did the same and tried again.

"Test test. Comms check." Her voice sounded mechanical in her ears, like someone else's voice, coming through digital radio.

"Loud and clear. Miss Ritter, right?"

She nodded. Squeezed the button. "Yes."

"Welcome aboard. I'm Tech Sergeant Kline. I just need to brief you on a few things. Normally we'd do this before you boarded, but we were going for minimum time on deck. You're already briefed on the flight plan, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then this is just your safety brief by exception. Have you flown in one of these before?"

She shook her head.

"No problem. You're already in and strapped in. In case of emergency, stay strapped in, feet flat on the floor, and sit back with your head against your seat back. You can hold onto your harness straps if you want. If we land hard, your seat will stroke down to absorb the impact. Once all violent motion stops, you

can release your harness. Just twist that knob on the front there, and then make a circling motion like this.” He pantomimed with his hands, twisting an imaginary knob with his fingers and then moving the imaginary knob around his stomach in a tight circle, as if rubbing his belly. “All the buckles should pop right out. Your exit in an emergency is that window there.” He pointed to the big window embedded in the sliding door by which she had entered. “Don’t try to open the door. Grab this lever—” He put his hand on a lever set into a recess in the door. “—and swing it to the other side, and then push the window out. It’ll come right out. Then climb clear. Watch for the rotors. If the helicopter is rolled, so this side is closer to the ground, go out the high side instead. Got it?”

None of this could she say was making her more comfortable, but she understood and indicated as much.

“Roger. In the case of a water ditch, make sure you stay strapped in until all violent motion has stopped. Hold your breath and let the cabin fill with water. Once violent motion stops, unstrap, then go for that window, push it out, pull yourself out, and swim to the surface. And remember the helicopter will roll over as it sinks, and everything will be upside down, so the handle will be on top, above the window. When you unstrap, hold onto your seat with one hand and go hand-over-hand to the window, and feel above it for the handle. It should be illuminated, which will make it easier to find. Once you get to the surface, inflate your LPU like you were taught. Any questions?”

Discomfort had given way to genuine fear. She fumbled a little with the button. “No questions,” she said, through a slightly dry throat.

“Of course we’re not expecting anything to go wrong, but just in case. Anyway, as far as when we get there, they briefed you on hoisting ops, right?”

She nodded. To her newfound fear of flying in a helicopter was added an acute clutching in her stomach at the thought of how it was to deliver her. They had explained to her how it would go, but there had been no opportunity for proper demonstrations or practice.

“Okay. Once we get into a hover, I will come get you and hook you up to the hoist, and I’ll help you out. Once you’re hooked up, just hang onto your vest and settle into your harness. It’s a piece of cake.”

Melody nodded again.

“All right. We’ve got about an hour en route, so relax. Feel free to get some sleep. I’m going to disconnect you, but if you need anything, just give me a slap on the arm.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He gave her another thumbs-up and then disconnected her comms lead from the aircraft’s ICS cable, stowed it, and settled into his seat behind his gun.

Melody looked out the window again, but there was nothing there to see, now. Only darkness, as if they had left space itself behind and were flying outside the universe. She leaned her head back against the canvas seat—which was much too vertical to be a comfortable back- or head-rest—and closed her eyes. There would be no sleeping. The helicopter struck some kind of swirl in the air and jolted, and she felt a shock of adrenaline go through her. His “safety brief” had entirely ruined the helicopter experience for her. She could only ride along in the dark and try not to think of what awaited her at the far end of the transit. The air flowing in through the open windows began to cool, and she realized she had been sweating again. Once again, the chill was welcome.

Visions rolled in and out of her mind’s eye of what lay ahead, along with ideas about the mission and what might be coming. She tried to focus on the objective, on Tom and on the

process of rendezvousing with him, securing the information in his possession, and how she might deliver it to the rest of the team and to the Internet at large. She thought through various contingencies—hacking into a local WiFi network, using a stolen computer, having to defeat a local or national firewall in order to reach the Internet—and the tools she had brought with her for each. This was the realm of problems with which she was equipped to deal, and it was useful to distract her from her present circumstances.

What seemed a very long time later, she heard the sound of the helicopter change again, and she felt it ever so slightly drop out from under her, beginning a descent. The air became warm and filled with a new aroma. This was the scent of the sea, but it was different from that she remembered of visits to the beach in her youth. There was in it no note of the shore, no tidal rot, no seaweed, no marsh grass. There was only the smell of salty ocean air.

Someone shouted something, though she could not make out what. She glanced around and saw her companions looking to the aircrewman in the other gunner's seat, on the far side of the cabin and out of her view. To whatever he was saying or whatever signals he was giving they nodded.

The helicopter's roar grew louder, and louder, and she felt a very slight press into her seat back, and then the helicopter began to shudder, at first gently but then with more and more violence over the span of a few seconds. She gripped her harness tight and watched the others, but they seemed to be taking it all in stride. Indeed, Lars, Pete, and Yates were unbuckling their harnesses and making final checks of their gear.

It felt like an earthquake, or like the whole machine was coming apart. How could they just ignore it?

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Suddenly, the shuffling shudder of the helicopter fell away, replaced by a steady, sharper vibration. Melody looked out her window, but still all she could see, even with her goggles, was a black void. She kept her harness firmly fastened.

The aircrewmembers released themselves from their gunner seats and crawled past their passengers to crouch by the doors and begin making various preparations. Then, much to her dismay, on the opposite side of the helicopter, the crewman there unlatched the door and slid it open wide, revealing more of the blackness of empty space beyond. There was no sign of the sea or sky out there. The roar of the rotors poured in, considerable even through the double barrier of her headset and foam ear plugs. She watched as the crewman, heedless of the precipice inches from his feet, reached up to the metal bar on the ceiling and began fiddling with it. After bumping her helmeted crown on it once during boarding, she had forgotten all about it. He attached a large rope to it, unlatched something, and then stood and threw the end of it out, and it extended itself out the door of the helicopter, taking the rope with it. The crewman stood, then, bent under the low ceiling, one hand on the bar, his other hand held out to one of her companions—Yates or Pete, she could not tell which at this point. His gesture was a “stay” signal, and he held it for a moment. He seemed to be looking out the door and down at something she could not see.

A shift in the forces around her told her the helicopter was maneuvering. She felt herself pressed sideways, first one way and then the other, very gently, and then the aircraft stabilized, still rattling and vibrating.

The aircrewman kicked with his foot the coiled remainder of the rope, pushing it out the door and off the edge, so that it fell away into the dark and hung down from the end of the

metal tube. He looked down a little longer, this way and that, and then waved a “come on” command to the first of her teammates. As she watched, astonished, the latter reached out, took hold of the rope, stepped out of the helicopter, and dropped out of sight. Only seconds behind him went the next, and then Lars, departing his seat next to Melody, swinging out the door, and sliding down. Suddenly they were all three gone, and she was alone in the helicopter aside from its flight crew.

She had seen this sort of thing in movies, of course, and videogames, but to see it now, for real, in this pitch-black void, was so disturbing that it made her queasy. The aircrewman by the rope pulled a release of some sort, and the rope disconnected and fell away.

Just then, the other crewman pulled open the door on her side—only a couple of feet away—and then clambered over toward her. Melody felt the knot in her stomach go critical. He gave her a thumbs up.

She replied with a nod, against every screaming instinct inside her, as her eyes fixed on the edge of the cabin deck and the empty outer space beyond. He reached out to her and unfastened her harness, and she gripped her seat hard with her hand. When he beckoned for her to stand up and move toward him, it took her several seconds and a considerable act of will to obey. To move toward that opening, toward that fall, was as unnatural a thing as she had ever done.

He took firm hold of her, though, as soon as she was on her feet, and kept that hold as he ushered her toward the door and stood her still by his side. The other aircrewman moved up behind her and took hold of a control module hanging from the ceiling by the door. She saw the one in front of her reach out for something and pull it in. A hook. He took hold of the hoisting ring which formed the central link of her harness over her chest and connected the hook to it.

Melody felt ill. Her entire body was shaking.

He leaned in toward her. "Ready?" he shouted in her ear. She shook her head quickly, and heard him laugh.

"You're fine," he shouted. His voice was so small and far away, through all those layers of hearing protection and the cacophonous roar of the aircraft. "Go ahead and sit. Sit down into your harness."

Gingerly, Melody bent her knees, settling herself down into her harness, and felt it support her as the slack went out of the cable attached to her chest. Of course, that cable was anchored at its other end to the hoist outside, and as soon as she settled her weight into the seat straps under her buttocks, she began to swing toward the door. Before she could stop them, her hands had reached out to snatch for the crewman.

He peeled one of her hands away and placed it forcefully across her chest, by her armpit. Melody remembered what they had told her and complied, forcing her other hand to release him and then hugging her chest with both arms as tightly as she could, while he turned her around and pushed her out the door.

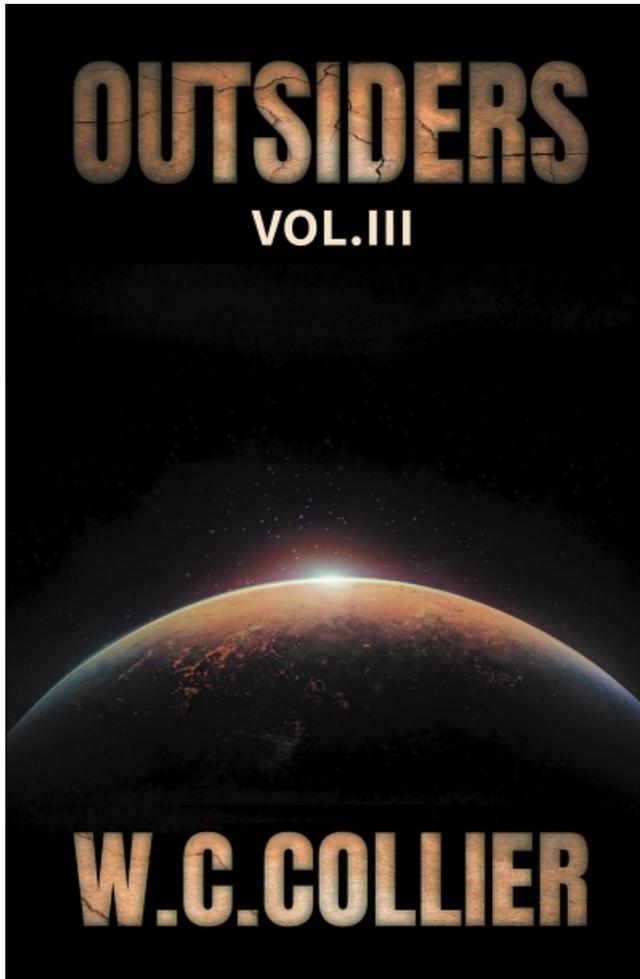
Suddenly she was dangling in space, battered by the gale of the rotors above, and terror and exhilaration swelled through her, overwhelming everything else. She must have yelped, but she could not even hear herself in the moment.

There was a sudden jerk, and then she felt herself begin to descend. She hugged the chest straps of her vest with hands which gripped so tight they might have been petrified, and she looked down. Below her, like a leviathan, inconceivable in its size, stretched a vast dim hull, low and flat, curving down into the black water to either side. The place where she would land was lit as by a bright spotlight, though only through her NODs could she see it. She could also see the partial circle of white spray kicking off the water to one side of the submarine. She rotated slowly in space as she descended, and the massive

conning tower came into view, rose up, loomed over her, and then passed away behind her as she continued to turn at the end of the hoisting cable.

Below her, the deck of the submarine rose, spread, became solid to her vision in some way she could hardly comprehend, and she saw people there, reaching up for her. The hands grabbed her legs and then her harness, stopped her slow spin, and lowered her all the way down, until she was sitting and then lying on her back on the ship's metal surface. They disconnected the cable from her, and above her she saw only a singular bright, blazing light, the helicopter's infrared spotlight, hovering in space, as the hook snaked up and disappeared in the glare.

Hands lifted her to her feet, and then one of the men began physically ushering her across the great steel deck to an open hatch. The last thing she saw of the exterior, as she began very carefully climbing down the ladder there—one shaking hand, one unsteady foot, one trembling limb at a time—was the submarine's conning tower again, rising high over her in the dark like a curved, black, steel, windowless, faceless skyscraper, like something out of science fiction, an alien structure on an alien planet. Then she was inside, all the noise was gone, and the tight confines of the ship's belly were closed around her.



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