

Smoke, Mirrors and Mayhem: The Good Fight Remixed

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"Warfare in 2030-2050" Mad Scientist Initiative by U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)

The Army University Press Future Warfare Writing Program

January 2017



He tried to keep the camera steady on the target, but the constant droning of the voice in his ear, and the thick stream of people on the street made it difficult. Just fourteen years old, Dominic could blend in with the crowd without attracting so much as a second glance. He was dressed in the same plain street clothes he had left home in a year earlier. Most passersby ignored him, assuming the small, black box in his hand was a Gameboy or some other inane device.

Dominic continued to follow the man's movements carefully, keeping him in the box's small sightlines. The man was moving suspiciously, sticking close to a crowd that seemed to keep pace. Dominic hated crowds.

"Are you sure he's a member of the Third Cartel?" crackled a stern voice in his ear.

The man he was tracking was six foot, and bore an unmistakable tattoo on his neck. "Unless someone else has decided to put a chrome scorpion on their neck."

Discreetly angling a small device in his hand, Dominic scanned for a metallic signature tattoo that could be anywhere on the body under the clothes. This was a tad easier back when everyone kept their tats under their sleeves, but the times evolved and so did they.

The device in his hand beeped quietly, signaling that the hack was done. With this bio signature, he'd have unlimited access to the Third Cartel's black sites, on and off line. "All right, I've got his bio signature, I'm getting out of here."

The brick above him exploded in a shower of rubble before he even heard the shot. Ducking, Dominic realized, perhaps too late, that his target was surrounded by fellow gang members. His device began to ping rapidly, as it picked up the rest of their tattoos.

"Oshun's swollen belly!", Dominic cursed as he ducked low. "They must have had something to warn them about the hack."

The crowd in the street began to roil, and somewhere far off the sirens had already started.

Dominic turned, and started to run. "Or they were tipped off," said the voice in his ear again. "Think about this way: You might not be the thief Gotham needs, right, but you are the one it deserves."

"It's far easier to focus on escaping if I'm not groaning at your bad jokes."

He turned down a side street and started on the route he knew led to another heavily populated street. Measuring only five foot five, he would be able to hide from the attackers in the crowd easily. Dominic hated crowds.

"Are you crazy?" the voice shouted in his ear. "After that shot, all the street level cameras in this area are going to be lit up. You might escape the Third Cartel, but the cops are going to spot you a mile away."

"I got an idea, man. These older parts of the city aren't mapped well, so I can lose any cops on our tail and, if necessary, deal with the Third Cartel myself. Just make sure Tee is ready at the drop point. I ain't risking my life for charity out here."

II.

Derrick paced a row of computers in an office park outside of Miami. Outside was a Muggle 93. Inside the vehicle, it was a crisp temperature-controlled 68 degrees. And Derrick was soaked in sweat.

"Sir, we're receiving reports out of Kotoria of a suspected altercation between the Third Cartel and the Fourth Branch. The local cops are going to get involved, but Mission Control wants to know if our parameters necessitate us deploying resources."

“Excellent monitoring work, Jamilah. Connor, what do we know about the local government of Kotoria?”

Connor swallowed nervously. “The government is an ally of the United States, but many of its ministries share profits with the drug lords, sir. The Third Cartel moves the most products through Kotoria, specializing in narcotics, wildlife trafficking, and children. The Fourth Branch is one of its chief rivals, but they are as much religious anarchists as they are a gang, sir—worshipping a variety of tribal deities to justify their cyber-terrorism against the treasury of Kotoria, multinational corporations involved in the natural resources sector, other gangs’ monetary holding, and the United States Government.” He adjusted his tie.

“Well, good to know that Master’s degree we financed is paying off. Cindy, what assets do we have in the region?”

Jamilah quickly spoke up: “Are we seriously thinking about getting involved, sir? Isn’t it standard practice to wait for contact from the local government or the feds?”

Derrick attempted to put on a serene face before addressing Jamilah, as he did not want to reprimand her. She was right. But the President had issued an Executive Order expanding the implementation of a 20-year AUMF against terrorist-supporting governments, to include drug cartels; and the DNI had issued classified guidance not to consult with the Office of the President, due to multiple intelligence agencies’ concerns that the Offices of the President and Vice President, as well as the National Security Council, were compromised by foreign intelligence operations based out of Russia.

All the confusion at the top usually meant doing nothing. But Kotoria was a special case, as they had an agreement with the United States to house drones, and there were several SOCOM and CIA operations already underway. This opportunity would have to be played delicately. The latest Top Secret memos indicated that the Fourth Branch was partnering with *Carmen Fist* to steal from the Third Cartel. Carmen Fist specialized in targeting US intelligence systems.

“You are correct, Jamilah, that in general this Office waits for invitation or orders to get involved. I am not considering departing from that standard. I need to know assets in the region to see if there is already an ongoing mission in the area, and if so, to get looped into what they are doing and pass along this information. We want to make sure our boys have the most up to date information about their operational environment. Now, Cindy?”

“We have a small team within half a mile of the incident, sir, with no active orders and the latest field tech, including the “pinballs.” And several kinds of drones, particularly our latest LINK drones.” LINK drones were among the latest intelligence-supporting assets that the USG developed with Elon Musk, after finally dropping the incumbent vendor partnership. The “pinballs” were made of metallic hydrogen, giving them low resistance, and the ability to travel faster than any drone to date. Packed in each ball’s tiny chassis was a linked super computer, that allowed the ball to act as part of a hive mind. From the moment of their inception, the pinballs had proved an invaluable tool for navigating the massive, labyrinthine megacities.

“Excellent work, Cindy. You’re going to serve as Operator to them. Alert them of the incident and tell them to investigate and keep track of who is going in and out of the area. Also tell them to be alert to the presence of Carmen Fist. Make sure that they are cleared to be in a hot zone between the Third Cartel and Fourth Branch.”

III.

Dominic absentmindedly rubbed the raised skin on the back of his neck where his own tattoo. The cartel signatures were a good way to track members and loyalties internally, but ever since scanners had been created to read them through clothes, it had made members easy targets.

“Stick to the side streets and head back here,” the voice said.

The pounding of footsteps rose behind him. “Wata’s Waves, they are getting closer!”

Quickly, he turned down another winding alleyway. The police force still hadn’t mapped the older parts of the city, making them the perfect highways for illegal activity. There was just too much ground to cover, and the layout of the old buildings followed no sense of order, making reasonable sight lines almost impossible. Slowly, more areas were being wired in or demolished, but large swaths of land were still left in their original state, off the grid.

Families leaned out of windows high above to see the commotion below. As Dominic ran further into the unmapped area, the sun was blotted out by the buildings above him, leaving the street in a dim shade. Ahead, a stone ramp rose on one side of the street, leading to the second residential level. He ran up it, just as another shot rang out from behind him, shattering an antique parking meter, and sending coins sprawling into the street.

Almost immediately, residents ran from their homes to claim them. The pieces themselves weren’t worth much, but melted down, they could be sold on the thriving black markets. The sudden crowd slowed Dominic’s pursuers down, and he weaved through alleyways to try and evade them.

“All your praying to Mami Water paid off. She favors you with good fortune.”

“Yeah. Need more than good fortune right now, though. A place to lay low deep in the cut would be better. I need to get indoors; do we have any safe-houses around here?”

“None that you can use when you’ve got the Third Cartel on your tail. A block up, there’s a dead bunker. Head in there and wait an hour or so before coming back here.”

“Dead bunker! Great idea.”

The ‘dead bunkers’ were artificially created electronic dead zones. The cartels used them to clean off any traces their members might have picked up while out on the streets. Dominic didn’t have to be told twice, as his pursuers had shaken off the crowd, and their footsteps could once again be heard echoing off the building walls.

“And make sure you switch the scanner off. If we lose that bio signature, this whole thing was a waste.”

“I know that and thanks for the reminder. Anything else I need to know before I head inside?”

“Yeah, don’t panic, but Carmen has alerted us that an American force nearby has been activated. Smaller than 10, but we don’t know the size. They got the new tech, so if you see them, try and get a scan of one of the pinballs. If Carmen can get us into the American satellites and drones, that will give us a huge advantage in using the Americans to disrupt the Third Wave’s safe houses.”

“Kali’s dank breath! I don’t want to be involved with the Americans.”

“Gotham needs you...”

Dominic sighed. “I’m going dark.”

Dominic had no desire to see what happened if he came back empty-handed, and still running, switched off the device.

The bunker was easy to spot. It was a raised, grey box about the size of a phone booth. He ran up to it, pressed his hand against the side, and a door slid open. He threw himself through the gap just in time to hear the thunk of bullets hitting the outer wall. His stomach lurched as the box descended beneath the pavement.

The speaker in his ear crackled static as the EMP turned on. In his haste, he had not switched it off. *That's going to come out of my cut*, he thought, and swore to the darkened box around him.

IV.

"Commander, we're receiving a transmission from OLIE of gang activity in the area and being told to investigate."

A small holographic map of the City appeared. "Using city cameras and drones, we've identified a local male, around 5'5". Facial recognition says that this man is Abdou Diop, a highly wanted cyber-thief, and suspected member of the Fourth Branch. He may be going by another alias."

"Good work, Alex. Where is Diop now?"

"We've lost him, Commander, in the Old City. He disappeared here, at what appears to be a phone booth." A purple dot pulsated on the map.

"Fuck! Not the Old City."

"Thank you, Russel," the Commander said, somewhat annoyed, "for that eloquent reminder of the dangers of our jobs. Now mind your language, soldier."

The Commander studied the map. "From our last deployment to this City, we know that they've got EMP dead zones to stop our surveillance. We're going to have to do this one on foot."

"At least we're not going to get hacked," said Russel.

"This isn't the kind of mission we want to do, but it's what we signed up for. We are one of the only units who can operate in the megacity and map those dead zones. If we don't do anything stupid, we'll all live until tomorrow when OLIE will have more information about how to proceed. So suck it up and let's get moving...NOW!"

"Alex, get us a route there. We're going to figure out what happened at the phone booth."

V.

Four US agents in gear hidden under loose plain clothes gathered around a very large pothole on a dimly lit street.

"Commander, I'm not getting phone booth as much as abandoned construction project. This appears to be a dead end."

"Not so quickly, Russell," the Commander said, looking around. "What's your take here, Sam?"

Sam scanned the surrounding area and then looked again at the large hole. "Well, there are bullet marks in the surrounding areas, as well as what appears to be fresh gunpowder. Yet why shoot at an empty hole?"

"Why assume the hole was empty when they shot at it?"

"Good point, Commander."

"Scan it and tell me what's down there. Russel, ping one of our nearby drones."

"On it!"

Opening a small briefcase, Alex and Sam assembled what looked like a small laser gun and began scanning the area around the hole. A few minutes later, a 3-D hologram map of the tunnel appeared.

"It appears that the phone booth was some kind of makeshift elevator that has been dug up by someone perusing something or someone in the old telephone booth. These colors on the map here indicate recent EMP activity. It's likely we won't get a drone signal if we pursue. There also appears to be residual signature consistent with the activities of Carmen Fist. Lastly, although the shaft goes deeper, there is an entrance to the adjacent set up building about two stories down through what appears to be a garage door."

"Thank you, Sam. All right team, let's get some grappling hooks, we're going in. Send a transmission to OLIE updating them on our findings and get them this map for our database. Then radio silence because we don't know who might be listening."

VI.

A small motor kicked into action, startling the four agents frantically looking for a light switch.

From deep in the growing shadows, a firm, soniferous voice barked: "Why is that door closing? And why are these lights not on yet?"

Russell strained to see his commanding officer's expression, "Ma'am are you talking to us or the Operator?"

"Anyone who can answer that question is my target." Her visor slid down her eyes—the door would be fully closed in 45 seconds and it appeared to be interfering with their broadcast signals. "Alex, deploy the Pinballs."

"Aren't we supposed to maintain radio silence, ma'am?"

"There's a door that wasn't on our map that is now closing. And the Fourth Branch are the most wily cyber-narcos in the world. Seems to me like they're already getting the drop on us."

Alex pushed a button and 16 small spheres—four from each agent—buzzed out of their CombatPacks(tm) and whirled into formation around the squad.

The Commander barked: "Pinballs: Execute Delta Double Back, Scenario Zed. Authorization: Charlie Echo Gamma. The rest of you, visors down and let's find this outpost." Eight spheres zoomed under the door before it closed, plunging the team into darkness.

A bright light emerged around Russel.

"What the heck is that, Russel?" Alex asked.

"A flashlight, Alex. Antiquated technology, but harder to compromise."

"Sorry to interrupt—"

"No you aren't, Sam"

"But we are getting some results back from our local Pinballs—this east wall is not a load bearing wall, which would suggest there is a concealed passage."

"Good work, Sam. You and Russel try and find us another exit. Alex, get us re-connected to OLIE stat; I needed to hear from them five minutes ago."

VII.

Glancing nervously at the wall map of Commonwealth of Kotoria, Derrick was trying to locate evidence of his team's progress.

"When was the last transmission we received?", Derrick queried, almost off-handedly.

"Fifteen minutes ago, sir. After they reported a strange signal from an entire wing of a building that was not in our maps."

"I can't believe these damn drug pushers are able to hide in plain goddamn sight. Where were our maps from?"

"The central ministry of Kotoria, sir."

"For pete's sake, is the whole damn government on the druglords' payroll? Jamilah, when are we getting the signal drone in place?"

"ETA 3 minutes, sir."

"I can work with that. Operator, keep searching the channels for any contact and prep the Pinballs' bandwidth for a massive data transfer. Keep the signal drone cloaked, please. No undo attention."

The mission had evolved into a simple one. There was evidence of a broadcast signal from a set of buildings that built a backdoor through which cyber-narcos smuggled money. They were going to shut it down and push through some harmful code.

Things started to go off rails when the buildings' map proved to be incorrect. While the satellites were mapping what they could, the Office of Low-Intensity Engagements (OLIE) had dispatched their cloaked signal drones to create a secure wireless connection to link the satellite data to the team on the ground.

"ETA 2 minutes, sir."

"Excellent work. Deploy the LINK drone as soon as you can, don't wait for my order. Remain cloaked."

VIII.

"Commander, we've found and opened the hidden entrance."

"Great work, Sam and Russel. Get the Pinballs mapping that room. Keep scanning the channels. We've been out of contact for about 10 minutes by my count, so protocol would be to send in a LINK with a data upload. I want to have these areas mapped and uploaded."

The little spheres buzzed into action and began scanning and mapping the room.

IX.

Whoosh!

Three large wooden spikes flew across the room.

"Booby traps!"

"Thanks, Russell, we know that already. Anyone hurt?"

Shallow breathing could be heard faintly from the other side of the room.

"Sam's been critically wounded, Commander. That spike entered her heart."

"Alex, what can we do for Sam?"

A Pinball drone began quickly performing a body scan. "She's on the edge of massive heart failure, and has a crushed lower leg. We can patch her up in the field, but there will probably need to be an examination later to make sure that the integration is taking."

"Has Sam signed the integration waiver? A number of our men and women under arms have been uncomfortable with the cybertic recovery technologies."

"Sam has, commander. It was a pre-condition for joining the squad."

"Then save Sam, Alex, and let's get the bastards who did this."

Alex turned on the squad medical 3-D printer. "This should take care of the leg."

Out of a small pack, he pulled out a small set of cellular nanites. Adding it to a needle, Alex injected it into Sam's heart, monitoring the progress of cellular regeneration on the Pinballs' projection.

"Heart integration appears to be taking, Commander. Rebuilding the left ventricle now. Blood flow will cease for 2 seconds once the new side of the heart is done to connect with the old heart."

X.

Dominic's breathing was frantic. He could hear the agents' radios in the next room, and the tell-tale THWACK that meant the booby traps had gone off. *They shouldn't have followed me.* The irony was not lost on him that he had outrun the pursuing gang only to be cornered by federal agents, but he had no time to dwell. Their drones would pick him up any minute, and he had to move. He tried to creep quietly through the darkened passageway.

From the other room, he could hear the whir of drones and the cry of someone in intense pain. *At least they're not dead,* he thought, and continued to move forward.

Through the wall he heard, "LINK scan almost complete."

Damn, they're going to upload the building. Losing another safe house would be a blow, but that would be the least of his worries if he couldn't get back out. The 'dead bunker' had been destroyed by his pursuers, one exit was completely blocked by the agents, but the bunker was also connected to a patchwork of unmarked, decommissioned sewer tunnels. He spotted one of the entrances up ahead, and was about to breathe a sigh of relief, when there was a tiny, metallic clicking at his feet. Dominic looked down and saw a shining silver ball on the ground before him.

"Oh sh—" was all he managed before a fine mist sprayed from the drone's body, paralyzing him in place. His limp body dropped to the floor.

XI.

"Commander, LINK has a complete read of the building."

"Excellent work, Russell."

"The building was found to be almost completely empty. They must have seen us coming and bugged out."

"Almost?"

"Well, that's the good news. One of our pinballs picked up a Fourth Branch member. He fits the description we have of Abdou Diop, and you'll never guess what he had on him." He produced a small, black box that could have been mistaken for a Gameboy.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"And it's full. Bio-traces on over fifteen Third Cartel members. It's not Carmen Fist, but it's a start."

"Outstanding work team, grab the Link, let's upload and move out."