

# Outside

by Michael P Calligaro

"I need those numbers now, Jeremy!"

Jeremy clenched his teeth and locked his eyes on his screen, trying his best not to look back at his boss, Sam. "I'm sorry, sir, but there are a thousand here and you only gave them to me half an hour ago."

"A team player would be able to prioritize his time and get it done. I can see you just don't care to pull your weight around here."

His blood pressure rising quickly, Jeremy tried to calm his heart with deep breaths. If the bastard really needed the numbers booked right away, he'd have set a reasonable goal for getting them done. No, he was just being cruel for cruelty's sake.

"I'll do my best sir, but you've got to be reasonable."

"I don't have time to be reasonable! If you can't pull this off I'll--"

Jeremy's watch started its quiet yet piercing beeping. Two o'clock. Time to go outside. He silenced the alarm with a flex of his wrist and pushed aside the financials. Looking over his shoulder he sized up his short, overweight boss. With a shrug he said, "Break time. I'll finish this off when I get back."

Sam's face turned red and he opened his mouth to speak. Jeremy cut him off. "Sorry sir, but I'm sure I don't have to remind you that mandatory break time is a federal law." The boss spun around and stormed off, his pudgy legs fighting to stay under his body as he leaned forward.

Standing up, Jeremy towered over the cubicle walls designed for shorter workers. He easily stared down into his neighbor's tiny space. "I'm going now, Alan."

Alan stared up at him with caring eyes. "I can't understand why you of all people, let him ride you like that."

"You know me. I'm a total pushover before my afternoon latte."

He nodded. "You be careful."

Jeremy smirked, "You're just saying that because you know Sam will make you pick up my workload if I don't make it."

His coworker and friend shook his head solemnly. "You know that's not it." Then Alan's face broke into a smile, "But you'd better hurry back this time. Sam hates you doing this and takes it out on me when you're late." He sat up ramrod straight and shook his finger at Jeremy. "That Jeremy, I'm going to skin him alive one of these days."

With a laugh, Jeremy replied to his mock boss, "Yes, sir!" Chuckling, he strolled to his locker. The firm had conceded to give him the one closest to the elevators in hopes he wouldn't go traipsing through the office in outdoor gear. For the most part he followed their wishes on this matter, though every once in a while, usually immediately after review time, he conveniently forgot something at his desk and didn't realize it until fully dressed for outside.

It took a retinal scan, a palm print, and an extensive thermal signature verification, all done in under ten

seconds, to open his locker. Standard locking mechanisms only used a palm print, but most people only stored a pair of sweats and some athletic foot gear in their lockers. Jeremy slipped off his tight constricting dress shoes and tossed them into the spacious hole in the wall. He considered changing his dress pants and button-down shirt to something more comfortable, but decided against it. He really didn't have much time. Still, he tore off his noose, or "tie" as the company liked to call it, and tossed it onto the shoes. Pulling the thick kevlar farmer johns over his existing clothes, he ignored the wrinkling undoubtedly going on underneath. If they wanted him to always wear pressed clothes, they should have given him a longer break at two o'clock.

His favorite pair of boots came next. These were thick black leather, with steel toes and indestructible composite treads. He pulled up the legs of his armor and slid on the boots, worn long enough to perfectly conform to the shape of his feet. Both took four heavy steel latches before they locked into place. He then slid the leg armor over the tops of them, exposing only the lowest parts of his feet.

The jacket was special. Though the top of the farmer john already provided a layer of kevlar to protect his chest, the jacket added two more, separated by a viscous compound supposed to both radically slow projectiles and automatically fill holes that might inadvertently show up. The jacket hadn't failed him yet. He connected the beaver tail in the front to dual strips of heavy Velcro in the back. This would keep the jacket from riding up and give a bit more protection between his legs. Strapping the front closed, the familiar rub of its neck protection fitting snugly against Jeremy's chin and ears started his heart beating in anticipation.

His gloves covered only the outsides of his hands, and were made of a thin metallic substance whose formula was known only to some wizard materials guy in Japan. The backs of his hands didn't need to move, so this inflexible yet amazingly tough material was suitable. Besides, his fingers would be protected by the gun. He caressed one of its barrels lovingly, then grabbed his helmet. The majority of the helmet was made of the same material as the hand covers, only ten layers thick with the jacket goo interspersed between each layer. The front of the helmet sat right against his face, allowing for two small eye sockets. These were filled with a thick clear Lucite that made for the weakest link in his armor. Still, he didn't plan to stand still long enough for someone to get a clear shot at his eyes.

He took a deep breath, testing the helmet's filters--not that he expected them to malfunction. As with the rest of his suit, there was little to go wrong. It had few moving parts and no electronics to crash. Some guys became reliant on gadgets like night scopes and proximity radar on HUDs in their helmets. Some even eschewed straight vision, keeping the helmet secure and using cameras and screens for vision. Jeremy consoled himself with the knowledge that most of these rich weekend warriors didn't make it through many trips outside. His simple, effective armor served him exceedingly well. The fact that he couldn't begin to afford such gizmos on his salary never entered the equation.

He grabbed the rifle and checked it over. Again, where some execs owned fancy lasers and disrupters, Jeremy used a good old fashioned lead-slinger. Still it had cost him a pretty ten spot. Some people saved their money to buy vacations to the distant regions. Others liked home entertainment systems. Jeremy had devoted his savings to this rifle, as it, more than his armor, kept him alive outside. It had a protected compartment for his left hand halfway up the barrels. His right hand fit into the rear protected compartment, which housed the grip and its four hair triggers, one for each finger. His thumb had easy access to four buttons, each of which toggled a barrel between single shot and three shot burst. He had turned down the autofire option, as it usually only wasted ammunition. Besides, he could approach that rate by drumming his fingers across the triggers.

He had loaded armor piercing bullets into the index and middle finger barrels, hollowpoints into the ring barrel, and exploders into the pinky barrel. The heavy gun held thirty 9mm bullets for each barrel and he

carried eight extra clips. Some people stayed in shape by working out all day in the gym. Jeremy went outside.

He sauntered out to the elevators with his rifle thrown casually over his shoulder, his boots making a heavy thud with each step, even through the thick carpet. Most of the normal office people were used to this and paid him no attention, but he almost gave a visitor a heart attack when the elevator doors opened. Her eyes wide in fright, she watched him step onto the elevator and punch the ground floor button. She obviously considered getting off right there, even though it wasn't her floor. She decided against it and tried to keep her composure by staring at the doors and not looking back at him.

Jeremy smiled inside his helmet. This was part of why he went outside. Up there, he was nothing more than a lowly clerk in a huge accounting firm. But when he donned his armor and went outside, he was something much more. He was a warrior, a fighter. He was somehow better than the stupid execs who walked all over him on their way up the company ladder, leaving him stagnated in his little cubicle. None of them went outside. They might be sharks in business, but it took something much more fierce to make it in the real world.

The elevator stopped at the woman's floor and she got off a bit too hastily for her apparent composure. A tall, muscular woman stepped on, looked him over, and nodded. Most of the wimps in the office called him crazy, but every once in a while he met true people, those who looked to him with respect, not fear. He considered saying something to this new woman, but they reached the ground before he could work up the nerve. Amazingly, he was about to go outside but was afraid to talk to her. Maybe this was because with women he didn't get to wear armor nor carry a rifle. For whatever the reason, his opportunity passed quickly as she turned right and headed off away from the door. Sighing, Jeremy turned left.

Fred, the old doorman with his graying hair and trembling fingers, patted him on the shoulder. "Must you go out again, Mr. Simmonds? It is my duty to remind you that we have quite good facilities inside."

A doorman in a world where hardly anyone went outside--at least Jeremy wasn't the lowest man on the company totem pole. Of course, Fred only gave his speech because they made him. They tried everything they could to get Jeremy to stop going outside. They canceled his medical benefits. They continuously sent him "constructive" memos. They gave him "emergency" assignments at 1:30. They probably even held him back in his career. Jeremy didn't care. What did it matter how high he climbed if doing so required he cower inside like a rat afraid of the light? "No thanks, Fred. Those facilities just can't compare."

Fred nodded. "I know, Mr. Simmonds. You take care." Despite what the execs made Fred say, Jeremy knew he understood why he went outside. The doorman flipped a switch and the inner doors opened. "Watch out for the Maniakz. I hear they've recently acquired some heavy weaponry."

Jeremy nodded. "Thanks for the warning, Fred. I'll keep my eyes open." He slid his hands into the rifle and lightly tapped the triggers as he stepped into the airlock. It wasn't really an airlock, but that's how he liked to think of it. The inside walls were pockmarked from countless stray and directed bullets and no controls existed inside. The only person who could open or close the doors was Fred, the doorman.

The rear doors closed and seven separate latches locked into place. Fred's voice came over the recessed speakers. "Nod when you're ready, Mr. Simmonds." Jeremy took a deep breath. He'd gone out every weekday at 2:00 for the last few years. But that didn't make this routine. Far from it. He still felt the butterflies bouncing around in his stomach. The hairs on the back of his neck still stood on end. His fingers still twitched in excitement and fear. Fear, that's why he went outside. Living in the sheltered life of inside with his simple job and its meager opportunities for risk-taking hardly made him feel alive--not like

he would in ten seconds, at least. He thumbed off the safeties on all four barrels and set them each for single fire.

After another deep breath, he nodded. The outer latches freed and the doors slowly swung inward. Jeremy immediately dropped and rolled over his left shoulder as bullets blasted into the wall behind where he had been standing. He came up shooting, using alternating armor piercers and hollowpoints. The Maniak in his weak armor quickly dropped.

If he wasted any time, more would come and pin him down in the airlock. Jeremy raced to the edge and looked both ways. The road around the Sweeny, Tusch, Yammato building was just as he remembered it from yesterday, a wreck. Nothing short of a tank could make it over that cratered and twisted road, and nothing short of a tank would want to try. Of course, Jeremy had every intention of trying.

To the left, a gang member had fortified himself behind some barrels. Stupid kid. Jeremy put a pinky shot into the closest barrel, the exploder rending it into fast moving shrapnel and disabling the punk. Outsiders were vicious and numerous, but not very well equipped in either the weapons or brains departments. Jeremy took off to the right, moving as fast as his heavily encumbered legs would take him. He paused at the first cross street, looked around the corner, and quickly pulled back. A shotgun blast followed right behind. A shotgun? It would take much more than a shotgun to do any kind of damage to Jeremy in this outfit.

He dove out and rolled, coming up in a crouch with his gun pointed down the street. He riddled the street punk with holes before he could even get a shot off. A bullet blasted into his left side. The jacket stopped it, but it still hurt. Jeremy spun and fired an exploder into the low window from which the bullet came. Some of the megascrapers weren't secure until the third or fourth floor.

Jeremy leapt up and raced down the street before the gunman could regain composure and continue firing. He dropped a flash grenade down the steps of an old subway stop as he passed. The gangstas congregated in the subways. It gave them their own partial indoors to protect themselves from the insanity of outside they had wreaked upon themselves. The bright light and smoke from the flasher should keep them busy until he got passed.

Moving swiftly, but slowly enough to catch any ambushes ahead, Jeremy made good progress toward his destination. The Maniakz were out in force today. He usually didn't see so much excitement this quickly. Stopping at another corner, he held his back to the wall and took a breath. He spun around it and almost shot the guy standing there.

The sandy blond wore no armor, just a dirty, once-white T-shirt and a pair of ripped jeans. He threw his hands up. "Holy shit! Don't kill me, man!"

Jeremy nodded and pointed his gun down the street, slightly away from the kid. The boy lowered his hands and held one out. "Hey, you got any money?" Jeremy shook his head and started to walk past him. "Then fuck you!" The kid pulled a small caliber revolver, it looked like a .38, out of his back pocket and shot Jeremy in the head. The bullet simply bounced off his helmet.

Jeremy knocked him out with the stock of his rifle. "Stupid kid." He then raced down the street to his destination. The door was unlocked, as always, and a little bell jingled as he stepped into the store.

"Jeremy, my man! You're running late."

"Hey, Arnie. They've got a lot of people on the streets today."

"Yeah, word is Julio's really pissed at you. He's getting sick of you walkin' through his territory every

day."

Julio was the current leader of the Maniakz, the current gang controlling this outside section of town. Both would change within the month. Jeremy had seen so many come and go he began to wonder where they were getting their warm bodies. "Julio's not a problem. Remember Alexis from last year? *She* was a nasty operator."

"Yeah, I remember. But you shouldn't write off Julio just yet. I hear he's got his hands on some heavy weaponry just to handle you."

"Just for me? I'm flattered. Aren't you worried?"

"Who, me? Naw, man, everyone loves me!"

This gave Jeremy a chuckle. He didn't really know what the shopkeeper looked like, as the ten layers of half inch lucite separating them tended to distort his image. "Got my package?"

"Of course! I can't let my most valued customer down." A mini airlock opened and Jeremy extracted a cylindrical package from it. He removed yesterday's cylinder from a pouch and put it in the airlock, then stowed the new cylinder. "I packed it extra tight today," Arnie continued, "in case you run into Julio."

"Thanks, Arnie. How's my credit?"

"Paid up through the end of the month."

"And you've got Alan's in here too?"

"Just like you ordered."

"Great! See you tomorrow."

"I'll be here. You take care of yourself though."

"Will do." He opened the door and peered carefully both ways down the street. It looked clear. With a final wave to Arnie, he charged out into the street and headed back the way he'd come. Okay, Julio, hit me with your best shot.

No one opposed him on Arnie's street. Even the kid in the jeans was gone. Everything seemed too quiet for outside. He glanced around the corner, but all was clear. Giving the subway stairs a wide berth, but eyeing them warily, Jeremy made his way to the next street. If anyone was going to try anything, it would have to be now. The airlock to inside was on the next street. He scanned up and down his current street again and, on seeing no one there, got down on his knees. Cautiously, he stuck his head around the corner at knee height. What he saw made him quickly dive back and try to scamper away. A whining sound lended desperate intensity to his scampering.

The whining sound intensified, and the street in front of him exploded. Jeremy covered his face with an arm as chunks of concrete showered down on him. Where in God's name did Julio get a rocket launcher? The police might actually do something about this. Mostly, they just let the gangs kill each other. Everyone who mattered lived indoors, usually in apartments on the lower floors of the buildings in which they worked. But a gang with rockets could actually threaten the protection of the buildings. It might even take down an exec traveling by helicopter. Julio had to know he couldn't get away with this.

Of course, none of this would help Jeremy. He still had to get indoors. Julio had parked a car in front of the airlock, how he got it down the street, Jeremy would never know, and was firing from behind it. No

way would Jeremy get a good shot at him before he could launch another rocket. And he couldn't go to another airlock, as Sweeny Tusch had closed all the others as a cost cutting measure. Maybe he could double around and sneak up behind Julio. He'd only seen one car and could get a clear shot at the gang leader as he turned the corner from behind him.

A multitude of gang members rushing out of the subway stops immediately thwarted this plan. Jeremy was pinned down between a lot of gang members with guns behind him and a single one with a rocket launcher in front. His heart beat wildly, and sweat beaded on his forehead. Though it was really for this rush that he came outside, right at that moment, he wondered just how important this all was. Surely living a boring life was better than dying?

The situation forced him to get over this bout of self doubt very quickly. He tossed a flash grenade over his shoulder then threw another around the corner. Not only would he live through this, but he'd be back out tomorrow. Living a boring life was the same as dying--it just went more slowly. Jeremy preferred to meet his maker head on, with guns blazing. He raced around the corner and sprinted at a forty-five degree angle across the street. As soon as he reached the far sidewalk he spun around and ran back into the street, where he zig zaged, watching Julio the whole time.

Julio took aim and fired another rocket. A smart warrior would have fired at Jeremy's feet, hoping the explosion would take him out. But Julio was just a gang member, no rocket scientist. He fired for Jeremy's head. Jeremy simply dropped to the ground and the rocket went by above him. Ignoring what it hit, he immediately jumped up and raced straight at the car, firing all four barrels of his rifle as he went. Julio ducked down and undoubtedly began to reload. Jeremy hoped the lead slugs and explosions slamming into the car helped distract his opponent.

Whether that was the case or Julio was just slow, the end result was the same. Jeremy reached the car just as the gang leader stood up again. He leapt up and slid over the trunk, his feet smashing into Julio. The gang leader went down and Jeremy kicked him in the gut.

"Open the door, Fred!" He yelled. The doors began to swing inward. Jeremy squeezed through and yelled, "Okay, close them!" Breathing a sigh of relief, he leaned against the inner doors and watched the outer ones latch. As the fifth latch fell into place, an explosion rocked the airlock. The outer doors shook, but held. The seventh latch fell into place and Jeremy moved away from the inner doors so they could open.

Inside again, he removed his helmet. "Fred! That fool didn't do what I think he did?"

"Yes, Mr. Simmonds. He fired the rocket at the doors while standing in front of them. He and many of his gang are burning right now."

Jeremy snuck a peek at Fred's view screen and shook his head. "I wonder who'll replace them?"

Fred shrugged. "It's always someone."

The woman who rode down with Fred also rode up. She must have had the same break as him. She looked over his beat up suit and smiled. "Did you have a nice adventure?"

She was talking with him! Somehow her appraising gaze scared Jeremy more than Julio's rockets. He managed to say, "I was definitely eventful."

"When I went out last Sunday Julio was still running things, but the Maniakz seemed to be on the decline."

Suddenly, the attractive woman seemed to glow in beauty. Though only a weekend warrior, she was a warrior nonetheless. Finding his voice, he nodded. "Julio certainly won't be around on Saturday, and I wouldn't be surprised if his boys have also been replaced. He really screwed up today."

"Want to tell me about it some time?"

He paused, then started berating himself. If he could run down a rocket launcher, he had to be able to handle talking with her. Slowly, he nodded. She smiled and handed him a card. "Call me." He watched her get off on the twentieth floor then stared at her card all the way up to his. Now he just had to work up the nerve to go through with it. Maybe he'd wear his armor.

He quickly stripped off the armor and threw it into the locker, keeping Arnie's package with him. He was back in his cubicle by two thirty five. "Has Sam been by yet?"

"Naw," Alan replied. "You made it. But phew! You reek! Didn't you take a shower?"

Shaking his head, Jeremy opened the cylinder and extracted two sealed cups. "Here, I brought you a present." He handed one to Alan.

"A latte from Arnie's 7-11?" Alan asked excitedly.

"He makes the best."

"He sure does! Thanks!"

Even though Alan liked the taste of coffee better than Jeremy, Jeremy knew he enjoyed his more than Alan did. Then again, Jeremy appreciated most everything in life more than Alan did. This, of course, was not surprising. Alan never went outside.

Moments later Sam rejoined him. "You know, Simmonds, a team player would have put off his break to get those numbers booked for me."

Jeremy leaned back and took a slow sip of his latte. He looked over his shoulder and smiled at his boss. "Yeah, but how many times do I have to remind you that accounting isn't a team sport?"

"What? How dare you speak back to me like that? I'll have you know . . ."

Jeremy blocked out the rest of the boss' tirade and sipped at his latte, smiling all the while.

**The End**

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