



(U.S. Army photo by Pvt. Austin Anyzeski)

Glitch, Part II

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Part one of the ongoing series can be accessed [here](#).

“This is really happening! Hang on!” Hashim barely had enough time to register Adams’ shout before the NCO slammed the big vehicle into forward motion. The sudden movement must have been enough to get past the drones, because Hashim saw no evidence of them on the drive to the Ammo Supply Point.

Once there, the two of them had no issues loading ball ammo, grenades, and star clusters into the back of

their truck, along with some AT4s. Hashim remembered asking Adams if he really thought all of this fire-power was necessary. He did not like the wide-eyed look that Adams gave him, as if he had not even registered the question but only handed him more linked ammo to put in the back. Hashim decided to let the matter drop.

After the ammo was loaded and tarped down with straps, the two men headed back to the command post. They slowed down a half dozen blocks away from the post as they were greeted by the smoking wreckage of what appeared to be a sedan.

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“Shit. Hold on, let me get some ammo out.” Adams pulled the truck to the side of the street they were on, opposite the wreckage, and opened his door. As he did so, Hashim heard a familiar sound. He slid his window open and looked up to see the weird field surrounding them, only this time it became a visible red hue just four feet away. Even from inside the truck, he felt a searing heat.

Hashim turned to Adams to warn him, but the Arms Room NCO was only standing outside and staring at the field. “SGT Adams!” he repeated, hoping the shakiness of his voice did not bleed through. Adams did not turn, did not even acknowledge Hashim. The young man undid his belt and started to climb through to the SGT’s side, but then heard him say in a normal tone, “I have to get out of here.” And before SPC Hashim could do anything, Adams stepped through the field.

With a sudden flash of light, the heat elevated to that of a roaring furnace, and Hashim was forced to turn to shield his eyes and face. In a moment, the heat faded and he turned to see the field fading back to the red hue.

Hashim noticed the smell of cooked pork, and he shouted for Adams, fearing the worst. There was no response. He pulled himself across the shift set of the truck, but the sight just outside the driver door stopped him.

What appeared to be Adams’ remains lay split width-wise, as if a saw had cut down through the Soldier as he went through the field. His front and back half had landed off center of each other, and Hashim could see the inside of Adams had been cooked to what looked like barbeque. His stomach convulsed as he tumbled out of the Humvee, and emptied his guts under the truck.

After he finished being sick, Hashim felt a strange coldness. He stood up, supporting himself with one hand of the Humvee, and climbed back in. Hashim rested his head on the steering wheel, and let his hand drop to the smooth hard metal of Adams’ M4, which drove the coldness back.

Gritting his jaw, the young Soldier got back out of the truck, being careful to not look at the remains of Adams. He undid part of the tarp, and moved two cans of ammo into the front cab. Hashim then busted one of the cans open with his multitool, and loaded ammo into his empty magazines in his front carrier. He slammed a magazine home into the M4, and let the bolt run forward as he wrapped the front part of the sling around his left arm.

Hashim moved to the front driver side of the truck and leaned as close as he dared to the field. Wiping at the sweat that blossomed from his face, he squinted down at the base of the field at what looked like a warping or blur in the field. As he focused on the blur, Hashim thought he could see the outline of what looked like a machine.

“What happens if I shoot it?” he wondered aloud. Without wasting time, the young man stepped back to the hood of the Humvee, switched the rifle from safe to semi, and fired two shots. There was a fizzing sound and a flash as the small silver machine flipped backwards from the impact. The field flickered, and then disappeared.

There was no time for relief. The other remaining machines, drones of some sort, took flight and rearranged themselves around his vehicle. The field reactivated, but he could feel a slight change in the temperature.

Hashim’s stomach tightened. He swung the barrel of his M4 to another drone and fired three times, his finger twitching uncontrollably. This time, he didn’t wait to see the results. He transitioned to the next drone hovering at the front of the Humvee and fired.

As Hashim moved to the next drone, all three machines remaining started to move as expected. Only this time, he saw that they were not going to stop. The drones rotated around his vehicle, the familiar red hue changing towards orange, and he felt the temperature rising.

Hashim tried to follow and shoot the rotating drones, but his hands shook and forced him to waste the rest of his loaded magazine with no results. He lowered the now empty carbine and moved back

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to the driver side door, keeping a careful watch on the drones. As he climbed in, he heard the drones start to speed up. The unbearable heat reached the same temperature that had preceded Adams' untimely demise.

He reacted without thinking, slamming the vehicle into reverse and stomping on the gas. The big engine roared as the Humvee slowly rolled back, and Hashim could smell the paint heating as the vehicle passed into the field. He floored the gas when he remembered with alarm that the ammunition was strapped to the back. The Humvee sped up, passing through the rest of the field without incident, and he sighed with relief.

As he glanced in the rearview mirror, he watched the drones continue to circle. Briefly, Hashim wondered if the drones would follow him, but they stayed in one place. He marked it down mentally, and drove back to the company.

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I leaned back from the bar, glass in hand. "Later we would find out that the drones were the advance force for the first of several expeditionary Russian-Chinese battalions. There was a variety of them, but each 'swarm,' as Soldiers called them, contained the big sixteen feet by sixteen feet offensive drones. These were designated as 'Berthas,' and were meant to knock down our attack squadrons. If even one wing of Apaches had left the ground that morning, we could have prevented the overrun of Fort Bragg. But one thing at a time." I looked back at the kid's fresh face, seeing the intentness with which he listened. "Next round is on me." I nodded at the bartender, and placed my glass on the counter.

"Hashim was pretty freaked out, but managed to pull through without any further issue. I sent a couple of teams to retrieve the ammo and hide the truck as best they could. As we brought the cans in, I had another team loading magazines and dealing out three more to each Soldier in addition to the rounds they drew from the arms room supply. Motioning to a couple of my experienced team leaders, SGT Griggs and SPC Linter, I pulled Hashim to the side and spoke quietly."

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"Hashim, I need you to focus." He nodded, and looked at me with wide eyes that were dilated with fear. "I want you to bust open the supply room and show Griggs and Linter here what we have for field supplies. I'm talking toilet paper, food, weapons, fuel, anything that we can use on the move." Turning to the other

two, I explained that we needed to be ready in case the drones started targeting buildings. "I'll get with the other PSGs and make sure that we rotate people in to help divvy up the stuff for movement. Bear in mind that we are not just moving Soldiers, but families too." Both men, young but made of stern stuff, nodded.

"Mr. Kitmore?"

I felt a small tug on my sleeve and looked down to see a little blonde-haired boy staring up at me. "One second, little guy. Men, you got your orders." Turning back to the little boy, I knelt down. "What's up, bud? You lost?"

He shook his head and said, "My daddy is looking for you."

I frowned, and asked, "Who?" He reached up to me, holding something in his hand. 1SG rank. "Ok, little man. I'll follow you."

He led me to the conference room. We had consolidated the families in the one room that was completely surrounded by solid walls and no windows. Most of the wives sat quietly, trying to keep their children quiet and distracted. Others sobbed softly. I winced as I saw my own wife holding one of the crying girls who looked like she was well into her pregnancy. It would be almost impossible to keep everyone alive, I knew. That would not stop a single one of us from trying.

"Kitmore!" I moved towards the 1SG, and handed back his rank patch as he listened to garbled chatter on the radio set up on the desk next to the rear entrance. "We have established a comms line to the other platoons around our area, but without an OE-254 I don't think communications with Battalion will be possible."

I frowned, and started to speak, but 1LT Hilton spoke first. "We can't risk the drones targeting our building by putting one up." The stocky Ranger with the deep Tennessee accent ran the company intel section, and was not the normal West Pointer. I imagined it had something to do with the fact that he had been enlisted for the first four years of his career. He had been assigned only a month ago, and from what I heard, he had been involved in the Army drone program and probably had the most experience in this particular arena.

Seeing my frown, Hilton explained. "If you look at their capabilities so far, you have a weaponized local EMP, armament, swarm tech which implies an artificial intelligence or advanced programing, and if their antenna array is any indication, whoever is on the

other end of that setup will be able to hear anything we transmit.”

1SG rapped on the table impatiently. “We need a way to communicate securely, still. If we use foot messengers, we can run notes around, but those guns would make short work of anyone trying to move in the open.”

I cleared my throat. “Some of the Soldiers have motorcycles. Might be able to get a couple of them under darkness.”

I was cut off by Hilton’s shaking head. “A common feature of drones is the infrared camera. Night, day, doesn’t matter to them. Even if we do not see the swarm, they could have high flyers, like the Grey Eagle or Predator. Loaded with fire-and-forget munitions, it would be too much of a risk.”

“What alternative do we have?” A new voice joined the conversation as SSG Roland Kayro walked up. He was the 1st Platoon Sergeant, and was accompanied by his butterbar 2nd LT Beckitt, a Citadel graduate fresh out of Basic Officer Leaders Course. Kayro nodded at me, and I returned the gesture, making room at the radio. Kayro had just returned from Afghanistan where he had led a platoon in conjunction with antidrug operations, and he seemed to be perfectly at ease back in full kit. The man knew his stuff, and had a good head of common sense.

The 1LT shrugged. “It’s a risk, to be sure. Any movement right now or later, without more intelligence on

capabilities, would be suicide.” He looked right at 1SG as he said the last three words, and the senior NCO mulled them over. No one said anything. We all just looked at him, awaiting his decision. The silence in the room was broken only by the familiar tapping of a dip can as the older Soldier prepped a lipful.

Finally, he moved over to the wall next to the radio and placed a finger on the map of the base hastily tacked on the wall. “Being off separate from the airfield and the squadron had its advantages, after all.” He stared at the map for a moment longer, then turned around briskly. “SFC Kitmore, I want all Soldiers to have a full combat load, two MREs each, and topped-off water sources. Get your Soldiers done, rotate out with 2nd Platoon, and have SSG Larson meet me here in twenty minutes to do the same. SSG Kayro, once 2nd and 3rd Platoons are finished resupplying, find me a couple of experienced motorcycle riders. They have to volunteer, and I would prefer that they aren’t married. I want to see all Platoon Sergeants and Platoon Leaders in forty minutes, mark now.” Without looking, I reached down and hit the start button on my watch as he continued. “I want everyone to brainstorm and come up with some plans of action to leave here and get the families somewhere safe. At this point, we have to consider anything.” ■

To be continued...