

Hidden Consequences
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I raised my head over the edge of The Torch, peering down at The Crown, hoping for a glimpse of Carl. I couldn't remember the last time I'd thought that Lady Liberty was beautiful. For the past six years, the only time I really looked at her was when I was busy trying to get as far away as possible, so welcoming and pretty weren't exactly the first things that came to mind. Looking down and not seeing Carl just made things worse, because getting away with all of these Tourists wasn't going to be easy without him. I gave up on seeing him, turned to Jen, and asked her to find him as quietly as possible. She flipped a switch on her belt and started tapping her side in that subtle way that always reminded me of how wrong we'd all been when we made fun of her code skills when she'd first joined us. With all of the scanners on the air, we'd all known for sure that the only way to get a message across silently was to do it at low power as quickly as possible before anybody could get a lock on the source - Morse code was just too slow. She had another way of looking at it, and saw that if you used a broadband signal really slowly, it would look just like a light bulb turning on or off, and no scanner would track for a long enough period of time to notice that we were actually saying anything. The best part was that since we were broadband, we didn't have any secret frequencies or encryption keys that could get leaked to the police; if you didn't have one of our transkeys, you just couldn't read the signal. Much less interesting than hearing excited whispers over the radio and still possible to be detected, but it was the best tool we had.

A few moments passed, the tourists starting to whisper more behind me, when Jen started tapping on her other side, with the message from Carl coming back. She didn't need to since the message was going straight to her head, but it was for my benefit so I could find out what he was saying, and she knew the tourists wouldn't catch on to it.

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I saw something darting at my face in my periphery and felt my right eye being torn out. I should have been expecting it and not felt any pain, but I was just too slow to remind myself of what was going on and realized only too late that Carl was spelling out the word force. After the pain, I just felt like an idiot. How many times had he said "Use the force, Jay" in that strange voice he swore was a reference to an old film? It had taken me so long to realize I could see without eyes and even longer to become such a master at it, but I could never remember that option under pressure. With so much of the population born blind and everybody given these magical "enhanced electronic" devices, nobody really thought twice about having them on, even me for most of my life. Of course, having activated my vshield, I should have thought he'd be doing the same, rendering himself invisible to eyesight, but again, not something I thought of.

I got adjusted to the changes in light levels and lack of long distance sight in my right eye and saw Carl there, waving at me like a madman. It's a funny thing being invisible. Some people keep it always on their minds and take full advantage, doing whatever they want knowing eyes can't pick up any signal from them and pretty sure the anti-smuggling outfit at Customs hasn't given anybody else their sonic-enhanced eyes which render vshields obsolete in close proximity. Others, like me, can't help being paranoid and moving discretely. It's like shouting in an engine room - you know nothing can detect your voice over the roar of the turbines, but it just feels wrong.

I raised my hand hesitantly and started patterning a signal asking where we should go. His response was pretty clear - sit tight. It looked like there were five

officers coming up the arm from three vehicles and helicopters all around. He was free to move down to the ground from his position, but we were cut off with so many officers in the arm. The plan was familiar - wait long enough in the torch for the police to work their way up, they'll look from the entrance around the area when they get to it, not see anybody behind our group vshield, and moving on leaving us to get out when all was safe. The plan also said Carl should be with me to help figure out when it was clear. I could hope he would stay in the Crown or one of the other safe locations where we could communicate, but those weren't nearly so good as having him with me. Tonight would be interesting.

There was nothing to do about anything but try to reassure the Tourists and work out our story for the night if we got caught. It used to be so much simpler - back when the statue was declared off-limits all of the volunteers for the police detail responsible for the area were old ex-Secret Service guys. They'd known us for the lack of a threat we were, so a story about getting lost on the island and not realizing where we were going usually worked enough for them. There'd be a stern talking-to, but they knew the traditions of newly naturalized citizens wanting to go to The Statue of Liberty's Torch, and I think they prided themselves a bit on living in a country where such things could happen, so they'd let us go. Those days were long past, though. I would never have believed that the day would come when running tours would require stone age radio techniques and removing eeyes. We'd always known there were ways to get around the scanning equipment, but going low-tech was so counter-intuitive.

Now, of course, it was the only way. Nobody could figure out why, but at some point the police detail for the island just didn't seem as interested in protecting and helping as doing what they imagined their jobs to be down to the letter. The first time we'd noticed was when a guide was caught as normal, but when he gave his excuse the officer just stared at him, clearly not accepting that a Liberty Park Ranger could get lost in his own park, and nearly had him declared a terrorist and thrown in jail. After that, we noticed some of the patrol boats sending spotlights in our direction during longer radio transmissions, and figured out that they were monitoring the airwaves for us, and crippled our communication aside from tiny bursts for years.

So a more complete explanation was going to be needed. I suggested the helping-a-person-who-fell-out-of-a-plane-into-the-torch excuse, but Carl didn't like it. The Police probably wouldn't either. Just as I was about to suggest the new-religion-holding-stealth-ritual-by-hologram-tricking-us-into-going-up excuse when a helicopter came directly overhead. They never came quite this close, but apparently it was going to be a night full of very different activity. I ducked and froze, holding my breath and hoping that none of our shuffling would be heard by those so close by on the helicopter. It hovered for a moment and moved on to another part of the statue. I kept watching, and it went by a series of positions, doubtless trying some new technique of locating us. Just as I was deciding it was safe to try communicating with Carl again, it came back. To my surprise, it was repeating the same run over and over again.

That was when I saw the laser signal in the sky above. It was from Leo, a friendly ranger who lived on the island and helped us out when he could. His signal spelled out the situation for us: The police had realized he was still awake this time and started asking him about us. Something must have told because they noticed his radio with the code attachment and started questioning him. The helicopter had the radio on it and they were transmitting at close range, trying to see if they could hear where the receivers were from the feedback. Jen caught Leo's message too and quickly flipped her radio off.

This did leave us with one option out, so I suggested it to Carl. It took him a while to get a response back, but it said all I needed to know "You're crazy". The

helicopter, which was still cycling between a few positions, was going to be our way out. With a vshield on the torch and one tuned to just the right radius attached to the helicopter, we'd be invisible if two people jumped on to the helicopter at the same time. I signaled to Jen and she grabbed the first tourist, gave him a location to punch into his eeye, and they waited for the helicopter to come around again and jumped. The helicopter carried on its business and didn't seem to notice their weight. We all watched as they let go of the helicopter at just the right moment as their eeyes calculated the perfect trajectory for them to land at the escape pad, and let out a sigh of relief. That pad had been put there for just such an occasion, though we never imagined jumping from so high, and under the vcamo it was pure padding.

We made it out two by two until the last of us were back at the Ranger Station where we usually ended up, just like always. Carl had managed to get down, and we were only missing Leo. After all the tourists filtered out into the bunks under the Station, Jen, Carl, and I started talking. None of us had seen enough, but we all knew that Leo was gone and not likely coming back. So we said goodnight and vowed to lock the hidden operation up unless we heard back from Leo. I still work as a Ranger on the island, seeing the same Police who likely took Leo away as a terrorist, and Jen and Carl who I've stopped giving quite so knowing a nod to in the morning. Every now and then, I'll run into some old equipment we'd used and consider starting the tours up again, but remember the consequences that Leo had made me realize. Just like Carl waving his hands wildly in plain sight, the potential arrest was always there, but just like forgetting to remove an eeye, I'd never stopped to see what happened as the police stopped being protecting and the hidden consequences became real.