

Something connected with a snap and she felt a sudden giddy rush of vertigo as an image exploded before her.

She saw a strange figure swaddled in bandages and crowded by electronic devices, like a hi-tech mummy. Monitors and an oxygen cylinder framed a bruised, puffy face. “I can see again.” The figure mimed the words as she said them, and then the point of view shifted, taking in Ron Temple at the window, framed by sunlight. His round face was tight with concern. “Me. I’m looking at me.”

The view bobbed. “I’m running you a feed from my optic implants,” said Bradley. A thin, brassy cable extended from inside his right-hand cuff and into a socket on the temporary eye interface.

“I look like shit,” she managed, swallowing a sob.

Temple came to the bed and perched on the edge, taking her hand. “Yeah, sweetheart, you do. But you’ll be okay. The doctors got the round out of you, it didn’t hit anything vital. Tissue damage mostly. The Kevlar took the brunt of the impact, slowed it down some.”

The next words fell from her in a breathy rush. “Matt’s dead. Byrne and Connor, too...”

Temple gave a shallow sigh. “Anna...They’re all dead. You’re the only one in the detail to make it.”

“We hoped Hansen, the Belltower guy, might pull through,” said Bradley. “They lost him on the operating table.”

“How long have I been in here?” She gripped Temple’s hand hard.

“Four days.”

“The senator?”

Bradley’s point-of-view nodded again. “She’s okay.

We already got a statement from her. That, plus imagery from the traffic cams, and we’re assembling a model of the incident. But that’s why we had to subpoena your optics. You’re the only one who got a good look at a face. I had tech forensics from the FBI reconstruct a few stills from the data in the image buffer.”

“We’ll get you replacements,” Temple noted. “Good stuff, new Caidins or maybe Sarif...” He handed her a sip-bulb of water. “I’m sorry you had to wake up blind...”

“Thanks for being here, sir,” she said, taking a drink of the cooling fluid. “Has someone—” Anna took a shaky breath and started again. “Has someone told Jenny?” Jennifer Ryan was Matt’s wife of some sixteen years. They had two girls, Susan and Carole. She remembered their house as a warm, welcoming place.

Temple nodded gravely. “She knows. I’m sorry, Anna.”

“I understand you and Agent Ryan were close?” asked Bradley.

The other man answered before she could. “Ryan was her...mentor.”

“Something like that,” said Anna, the words barely a whisper. She swallowed and straightened up. “Do you have the images with you? Can I see them?”

Bradley and Temple shared a look. “Okay,” said the agent, and he drew a folding Pocket Secretary PDA from his jacket; it opened up, blooming like a metallic flower. Bradley hesitated, then held it in front of him, tabbing through the virtual pages. “We’re sifting through witness statements at the moment, still building the picture.”

“Leads are coming together,” Temple offered. “We don’t have any suspects as yet...These creeps just melted into thin air.”

“We had a report about an unmarked helicopter putting down briefly in Montrose Park, but D.C. air traffic control have nothing on that,” noted Bradley distractedly.

“I never saw anything,” said Anna, her thoughts churning. “What about evidence at the scene?”

Temple shook his head. “No shells—they used caseless ammo. Fiber traces are a dead end, too. We did get a line on the car they used, though. License was fake, most of the registration marks were lasered off, but we got a partial from the engine block. Turns out it was listed as stolen from a shell company that’s a known front for the Red Arrow triad.”

“I killed one of them,” she insisted.

“They torched the corpse before they left,” he said. “Thermite grenade. All we got left is a heap of burnt scrap metal and some biological traces that come up blank on the Interpol register.”

Bradley gestured with the PDA. “Here’s the picture of the shooter.”

Anna studied the grainy, ghostly image through the other agent’s eyes. The blond hair, the hard, pitiless gaze of the man who killed Matt Ryan caught in midturn.

Suddenly she was back there again, collapsed in the street, wet with blood, racked with agony. Waiting for death. A shudder ran through her.

“Why...Why didn’t he kill me?” she breathed.

Temple squeezed her hand. “Best guess is, you lucked out. Black-and-whites from the Georgetown precinct were maybe ten seconds away at that point. Blondie there probably thought you weren’t going to survive a gut shot and decided to buck out instead of hanging around to make sure.”

“But he didn’t kill Skyler,” she insisted. “Matt, Byrne, the rest of the team, even the guy the senator was meeting, Dansky...They murdered all of them, but not her. If it was the triads, why the hell is she still breathing?”

“A warning,” said Bradley. “This is the Red Arrow telling Skyler to back off from chasing down the harvesters in SoCal. They’re showing her that she can be got to, no matter where she is, or who’s protecting her . . .” He trailed off and ran a hand through his hair. “This whole thing is a mess. These people have made the Service look incompetent. Even Skyler’s started distancing herself.”

“Sure she has. This is Washington,” said Temple, with an irritable snort, as if that were explanation enough.

“No,” Anna shook her head. She placed her hands flat on the bed and tried to gather her thoughts, tried to screen out the howling emotional pain clawing at the inside of her, forcing herself to think like a federal agent and not like a woman who had seen one of her closest friends brutally gunned down in front of her. “You saw that creep in the picture. He’s whiter than I am. I worked on a counterfeiting investigation against the Wo Shing Wo triad in Detroit, back in 2021. Those guys don’t hire contractor muscle to send messages, and the Red Arrow are no different.”

“You can’t be certain of that, Agent Kelso.” Bradley was studying her closely. “Skyler’s people have already had the Red Arrow taking shots at them back in Los Angeles. This is an escalation.” She saw her own expression tighten as he spoke.

In her mind’s eye, the moment was unfolding again, and she grimaced. “He shot Dansky,” Anna insisted. “There

was no reason to do that. The man was unarmed, no threat, not like the rest of us. And then the shooter went back, and *he finished him off. He executed him.*”

Bradley was quiet for a moment. “We’ve already interviewed the staff at Caidin.”

Temple nodded. “It was like someone kicked over a hornet’s nest in that place...”

Bradley continued. “Garrett Dansky was meeting with Senator Skyler to discuss some details of...” He drifted off, glancing down at his PDA again. Anna saw panels of notes, the words “United Nations” and “rumors” leaping out at her. He looked away before she could read more. “Apparently, the Caidin corporation are concerned about the possibility of some discussions going on at the UN. Something to do with the regulation of augmentation technology production. Pretty dry stuff. I don’t see the Chinese mob having much stake in that kind of thing. Right now, we don’t have anything to suggest that Dansky’s death was anything more than just a collateral.”

“The fact is,” Temple said, “we’ve got to work to keep on top of this. And you surviving is a break, Anna. I’ve got a couple of techs outside ready to debrief you if you’re up for it. The more you can tell us, the more we can do about getting these guys. Okay?” He gave her a supportive smile.

Anna tried to return it, and she felt a sob rising in her throat again. Perhaps if they hadn’t taken her eyes, she would have cried right then and there. She hated herself for feeling like this, barely able to control her emotions—the rage and the fury, the anguish and the sorrow that swept about her like a silent hurricane.

*Matt Ryan is dead.* The one person she trusted more than anyone else in the world, the man who had saved her life. The man who had given her a second chance. He had died and Anna had been unable to do a thing to stop it. Her hand instinctively reached for the pocket where the brass coin would be; but it wasn’t there, and her fingers tensed. She thought about the call she’d made, the night before the incident. Matt had always been there for her, and asked for nothing in return.

“The Service will not stand to let this pass, Agent Kelso,” said Bradley. “We will not let these men walk free.”

She took a shuddering breath and gave a long nod. “Yes, sir. I’ll do everything I can to assist the investigation.”

“Good—” Bradley leaned in to remove the wire, but she halted him.

“Before we do that, could I . . . Can borrow a cell? I need to talk to Jennifer Ryan. She needs to hear it from me.”

Temple handed her his vu-phone. “Go ahead. Take your time.”

When she was alone, and everything was dark again, she spoke the number for the Ryan household into the device and listened to it dial.

Inside her thoughts, something hard, cold, and beyond anger began to crystallize, like black diamond.

*Station November—New South Wales—Australia*

He remembered bits of what happened in the time between the drone exploding and awakening in an SAF field hospital just south of the redline.

He remembered drowning, or something near to it. The slurry of muddy orange-brown water in the fouled creek smothering him like the shock foam. He remembered the horrible ripping sound of Sam Duarte's execution at the guns of some autonomous robot predator. And he remembered the shadow, the hulking shadow that waded into the river and dragged him out over the rocks. The voices, talking in languages he didn't understand.

Saxon lost a lot of time there, or so it seemed. Days and nights blurred into one another. He found it hard to keep the passage of them straight in his head. Dimly he was aware that they had medicated him. The doctors talked about how the burns that the crash had inflicted on him were severe. They talked about the damage his cyberlimbs had suffered from the fall into the creek. The Hermes leg augmentations were shot, little better than scrap metal now; and then there was the litany of malfunctions with his internal implants, the optics and the reflex booster, the comms and all the rest. All this, without even a mention of how the meat, the human part of him, was faring.

All these things seemed faint and far distant, though. Each time he slept—if you could call it sleep—there were ghosts waiting.

Sam, Kano, all the others from Strike Six, all watching him. They never spoke, they didn't curse him or cry out. Sometimes they were intact, the black tri-plates of their flexible armor vests pristine and bloodless, gold-faced helmets raised visor-up as if they had just walked in off the parade ground. Other times, they were burned things, shapes of red and black flesh on charred bones.

They didn't blame him or forgive him. They just watched.

Sometimes, in those moments when he couldn't be sure if he was dreaming it or if he was seeing the real thing through a veil of painkillers, they would be in the room with him. Sitting on the beds, smoking a cigarette, sipping from a cup. And the shadow was with them. In the room, watching him like they did.

Saxon had lost men before. He wasn't a stranger to it. But he wasn't used to the idea of being a survivor, of being the *only* survivor. It gnawed at him.

One day he drifted back to the surface of consciousness and found the shadow sitting in the chair next to his bed. Saxon knew he was real because he could smell him. The shadow smelled like rich, strong tobacco, and the scent triggered a sense-memory in the depths of Ben Saxon's mind. He remembered being a boy, maybe five or six years old, his grandfather taking him through the streets of London past impossibly old buildings, to a gilt-edged hole-in-the-wall shop, all paneled with mirrors and advertisements for cigars. A man in there, selling packets of raw pipe tobacco, and the strange exotic textures that smelled like the air of distant lands.

The memory evaporated and Saxon blinked. The shadow was a man, a few years his senior, but intense and muscled, with an angular face like carved wood. Rugged, handsome after a fashion ...but hard with it. Saxon sensed that about him more than anything, like a ghost aura. The shadow was a soldier and a killer.

"You..." he managed, licking dry lips. "You're the one...pulled me from the creek bed."

That earned him a nod. “You would have died,” said the other man, the trace of an Eastern accent threaded through his words. “That would have been a waste.”

Saxon eased himself up a little, blinking away the last of the fog from his chemical sleep. “Thanks.”

“I did it because it was the right thing to do,” he went on, fixing him with an intense look, his right eye a striking silver-blue augmentation. “And, it seems, because fate deemed it right.”

Saxon shook his head. “Never believed in that stuff myself.”

“No?” The man drew out a cigarette, offered one that Saxon refused, and then proceeded to light his own with an ornate petrol lighter. “I am a great believer in the notion of ‘right place, right time, right man,’ Mr. Saxon.” He took a long drag. “And that is you, at this moment.”

Saxon noticed the man’s arms for the first time; they were like images from old medical textbooks, skinless limbs packed with dense bunches of artificial musculature over steel bones. Top-of-the-range, mil-spec cyberlimbs. For a moment, he measured himself against the stranger, wondering if he could take him on. Saxon concluded that at best, they might be evenly matched.

He looked away, glancing around the ward. They were alone. “Who are you?” He studied the man for a moment. He was wearing a nondescript set of black fatigues completely bereft of any identification tags or insignia. He was also unarmed...but then he showed a kind of careful poise that made Saxon suspect he didn’t need a gun or a knife to be lethal. “Are you Belltower?”

“I have a far wider remit than Belltower Associates.”

He smiled and exhaled. “You wouldn’t know the name of my...group. And that’s exactly how we like it to be. I suppose you could call me a freelancer, if you really felt the need to hang a label.”

*Deep black.* Saxon had crossed paths with men like this before, in his time with the SAS. Soldiers whose missions were so far off-book that they didn’t exist on any official documentation, groups that simply did not show up on the radar. He had to admit, he was intrigued. If a unit like that was operating in the Australian conflict zone, what did it mean? Was this man even fighting for the same side as him?

“My name is Jaron Namir,” he said, at length. “We share a similar past, you and I. Both of us have worked under, shall we say, *special conditions* for our respective homelands.”

The accent suddenly clicked with Saxon and he placed it. *Israeli. Which makes him, what? Former Mossad? Someone who got out of there before the war with the United Arab Front flattened everything?*

Saxon tried to keep the tension he was feeling from showing. This man knew who he was, and he’d revealed key information about himself, or at least laid out some false trail; that meant there was a good chance Namir never intended to let Saxon live.

“I wonder, would you let me make an observation?” Namir went on. He asked the question with all the certainty of a man who knew he would not be refused.

Saxon watched him carefully. “Feel free.”

“You’re wasting your potential here. Belltower offers a good career for men like us, I don’t dispute that. But the chance to really accomplish something? To make a

difference, to bring order to a chaotic world? Belltower can't do that."

A chill ran through the soldier's veins. "You're trying to recruit me?"

Namir studied him. "I read the after-action report on the failure of Operation Rainbird. You survived against very long odds, Mr. Saxon. I am quite impressed." He stubbed out the cigarette. "I could use someone with your skill set. I find myself a man down after a recent incident, and you make a good candidate. Interested?"

"Maybe if you told me who the hell you are."

"I told you, the name would not—"

"Try me."

Namir gave a shrug. "I am field commander of a nonaligned special operations unit known as the Tyrants. We are an elite, independent, self-financing group dedicated to maintaining global stability through covert means."

"A rogue cell?" Saxon frowned. Like any other, the spec ops community had its own share of urban legends, and in his time he'd heard stories of so-called rogues, operators who had dropped off the grid and gone into business for themselves; but the idea had always seemed a little too far off the beam to be truthful. Saxon had never believed anyone could run alone out there in the thick for too long, not without backup. "Tyrants... That name doesn't exactly have the ring of righteousness to it."

"I beg to differ," said the other man. "The true meaning of the word stems from the Greek *turannos*. It was only later the name gathered its negative connotations... In its original form, the term describes those who take power by their own means, instead of being awarded it through birthright

or elective. That is what we do, Mr. Saxon. We take power from those who abuse it. We restore the balance."

"Out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Belltower's failures cost you the lives of the men and women in your unit," Namir said, his tone becoming grave. "Are you really ready to go back to them, knowing that? Be honest with me, Mr. Saxon. Are you ever going to trust your employers again?"

Saxon closed his eyes, and for a second he saw the ghosts. "I have a responsibility. I signed a contract..."

"One that is near to ending." Namir made a dismissive gesture. "We can deal with that. If only a piece of paper is stopping you, believe me, I can make that go away." When Saxon didn't answer, he got up and straightened his fatigue jacket. "This offer won't come again," he said. "And if you decide to go looking for us after the fact, I warn you... there will be consequences."

Saxon looked down at his hands, one scarred flesh, the other scratched steel. Everything Namir had said about trust, about Belltower—all of it was as if he had plucked the thoughts straight from his mind. Each day that had passed here, each day he sat surrounded by his ghosts, every passing hour was eroding something deep inside him, and in its place it left only a cold hollow. That, and a slow-burning, directionless desire to claim a blood cost back from the people who had murdered Kano, Duarte, and the others.

"We can give you what you need, Ben," said Namir. "The Tyrants help their own."

When Saxon said the next words, they seemed to come from a very great distance. "I'm in."