

He didn't reply. Instead, he cut the one-on-one link as the convoy began to slow, the black iron fences of Montrose Park flashing past. They were a few moments away.

"Senator?" said the Belltower operative. He had a soft, polite voice. Skyler nodded and checked her reflection in the limo's windows.

"*Dansky's there,*" said a voice from the lead car. "*Taking our station.*"

"Copy," said Laker out loud.

Skyler's car halted and Anna was first out. Her other concerns were forgotten in a heartbeat. She was working now, her eyes scanning the street and the buildings, passing over the windows of the terraced houses with speed and care. She heard the SUV halt, heard the doors opening.

The senator was out and walking forward, Laker and the Belltower bodyguard flanking her. Dansky came up, a smile on his face, extending a hand.

When she scanned the street a second time, that was the moment when Anna Kelso felt a twist in the depths of her gut. It was an immediate, visceral reaction, and she couldn't quantify it at first. She glanced in Ryan's direction. He was looking at her with a questioning expression.

Something rang a wrong note in Anna's thoughts. She'd taken in the whole of the street scene, parsed it in a moment, just like they had taught her—and something did not fit.

Across the diagonal of Q Street, a silver Motokun sedan sat low on its shocks, as if it were too heavily loaded. The windows were opaque, and unbidden, Anna's hand slipped back under her jacket through force of habit.

She caught Byrne's gaze and he saw where she was looking; the younger agent's enhanced optics had a T-wave scanner that could peer through light cover. He peered at the Motokun and the sudden change on his face told her she was right.

"Tangos—!" Byrne's voice was suddenly lost in a roar of engine noise, and the sedan bolted forward from the opposite curb, tires screeching as the vehicle sped over the asphalt.

Anna's gun was clearing its holster as the silver sedan slammed into the back end of the town car and spun it about, ramming it up onto the sidewalk and into the line of planters ringing the restaurant's open-air terrace. The sedan's doors burst open and there were four hulking figures in black combat gear boiling out into the daylight. Each of them had a churning smoke bomb in his hand, and they threw them as one, lines of thick gray haze arcing up over the roadway.

Anna heard screaming coming from behind her, the clatter of tables being turned over and glass shattering as the restaurant's customers panicked and ran; and then she heard another sound, the familiar flat report of a grenade launcher.

She never saw the shell hit. One second she was bringing up her Mustang to bear, and in the next the hood of the limousine distorted and threw itself upward as an orange fireball consumed the front third of the vehicle.

A hot wall of gasoline-stink backwash hit Anna Kelso head-on and blew her into the lines of iron planters.

Inside her head, she could hear Ryan crying for help.

* * *

The Grey Range—Queensland—Australia

The veetol moved low and fast over the foothills, skimming the trees with barely a half-meter's clearance between the landing skids and the barren branches of the canopy. Dawn was still two hours away and the grim, moonless night drew in what little noise came from the tilt rotors at the veetol's wingtips, flattening the sound. No illumination emanated from the boxy aircraft; behind a blank, windowless canopy, the pilot guided the veetol by multiple sensor inputs from video feeds, laser-ranging returns, and a global satellite tracking system that delivered moment-by-moment data on the landscape flashing past beneath. Passing below any radar detection threshold, the aircraft rose and fell with the nap of the earth, closing inexorably on its target.

The map provided to Strike Team Six floated in the air above the metal floor of the flyer's cargo bay, projected from a holographic imager held steady in Ben Saxon's hand. He turned it slightly so he could study the patterns of the guard towers ringing the insurgent camp. Saxon had a habit of pulling at his short, unkempt beard whenever he was deep in thought, and he did it now, peering into the glowing red wire frame as if the virtual would give him some sudden new insight into the mission.

"Five minutes out, boss," said Pete Kano, nudging him in the ribs, pitching his voice to be heard over the steady thrum of the rotors. Saxon nodded, glancing at his second in command. They were a study in contrasts; the African was tall and deceptively wiry in build, big enough that he never looked comfortable inside the cramped confines of

a transport helo or APC, while Saxon was stocky and of average height. Where Kano might have been an athlete, Saxon resembled a street fighter—but there was no other man he would have wanted to stand with him on a mission as difficult as this one.

Saxon had been running Strike Six for Belltower Associates Incorporated for a little over two years now, and Kano was the only man who had stayed with him for all that time. Where Saxon had been recruited directly from the British Army's Special Air Service, Kano had "liberated" himself from a Namibian crime lord's war band after a Belltower battalion had wiped out his former boss's drug-running network. The rest of the team had similarly diverse origins, men and women gathered up from national armies, police forces, criminal groups, all of them drawn in by steady pay and high rates of danger money from the largest private army in the world.

Saxon wasn't one to shy away from the word "mercenary." It was what he was, what he did for a living; calling himself a "military contractor" made it sound softer, somehow—and Ben Saxon liked the grit of the real thing. It was the main reason he had walked into Belltower's offices on the very same day the armed forces of His Majesty's Crown had told him that his services were no longer required; the idea of a life on civvie street just simply did not register with him. He liked it here in the thick; it felt *right*.

As the mission clock display hovering in the corner of Saxon's eye line dropped to the four-minute mark, Kano gave the nod to the rest of the crew, and together they ran through their final weapons and equipment checks.

Saxon hefted the weight of the Steiner-Bisley FR-27 assault rifle slung across his chest and double-checked that the ammunition carousel was locked in place, the safety catch set. Eyes closed, he ran his fingers down the grenades and gear packs clipped to his webbing vest, mentally ticking them off one by one. Then, he blink-triggered the diagnostic subroutine for his augmentations; the legs and the arm, the optics, the feed-forward system, reflex jack, all of it. A line of green dots superimposed on his vision told him he was at full operational status.

He drew a breath. “All right, boys and girls. Get ready. Everyone, take your jabs now. I don’t want any of you getting the shakes or coughing up blood in the middle of this.” He pulled a rod-shaped injector pen from a pocket and waggled it at them. A line of frowns and grim nods greeted him, and his team mirrored his action as he dosed himself in the wrist of his one meat arm. The injector nipped at the flesh and he felt a brief, cool rush through his veins; the drug load inside the pen was a cocktail of battlefield medicines—pan-spectral antigens supposedly strong enough to counter any standard combat toxins, antimalaria meds, and a light measure of stims, all topped off with a dose of high-strength neuropozyne. The nupozyne was a necessary evil for anyone with a body full of augmentations. Without it, normal human cellular function would eventually coat any implant tech with scar tissue and corrupt the interface between meat and metal; Saxon had seen the results of it, the jitters and the pain that could turn even the toughest cog-head into a palsied wreck.

He took a moment to have a sip of tepid water from a canteen on his belt and swilled it around his mouth.

They’d been in the Australian theater now for more than six weeks, and Saxon could not get used to the dusty taste the country put at the back of his throat. He glanced at Sam Duarte, the most recent addition to Strike Six, a former gangbanger from the barrios of South America. Covered in complex street thug iconography, he looked less like a soldier and more like a stickup man—but Duarte had proven himself a lot better than just a street-corner gunslinger after the team had been caught in an ambush out at Coober Pedy.

It was Duarte who had explained about the dust; it was the trees. Up north, where the Free States forces were running wild, they were torching whole swathes of countryside, sending plumes of acidic ash into the sky. What drifted down toward the southern regions was what Saxon couldn’t wash out of his throat.

Belltower had been a part of the Australian conflict from the outset; at first they had just been corporate security, working for a petrochem conglomerate from Victoria drilling test wells in Aussie-held Antarctica. No one had expected them to find the biggest strike of the century under the ice shelf—and where there was oil, there was power. Fossil fuel’s grip on the world still hadn’t slackened, even as the fourth decade of the second millennium fast approached.

The political tensions that were already in place across the nation ground against each other, and soon the north was siding with Chinese interests after the same resources, while Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, and a handful of other territories hastily formed the South Australian Federation off the back of their black-gold bonanza.

And now there was a line of red across the middle of the continent, with car bombs and IEDs, camps and threats, and a conflict that would burn slow and long. While the north got on with ex–People’s Republic hardware and “advisors” flown in from Beijing and Taiwan, the south had newly deep pockets, and Belltower had been right there to pick up the payday. A third of the Australian conflict was being waged by private military contractors, and the lion’s share belonged to Saxon’s employers.

Today they were going to earn their pay.

The mission’s code name was Operation Rainbird; it was a multiple-level strike package comprising aerial bombardment of several northern forward posts and drone attacks on staging areas down the line from Cunnamulla to Quilpie, setting a column of fire that would be seen all the way to Fortress Brisbane. Strike Six had a special objective that fell into their more “direct action” remit, however—they were going to an insurgent training camp near Mount Intrepid to raze it to the ground.

Saxon and his men took the mission because they wanted it. The insurgents trained at Intrepid had killed the man whose place Duarte had filled, and they had tried to kill them all at Coober Pedy. For Strike Six, this had become personal.

Personal. The word echoed in Saxon’s thoughts and he looked away. He’d been in this so long, letting Belltower take him from conflict to conflict—Brazil, Afghanistan, Lithuania, Turkey, Iceland, and all the others—that the days blurred into one. The missions...The mission and the mission and the mission, one after another, eating up his life, keeping him in the place where he did what he was best at.

But then the paper came. Real paper, a real letter, not some e-doc in his data stack. Belltower’s top echelons liked to do that kind of thing, he remembered. They liked the old, traditional ways, all of them blue bloods out of Sandhurst or West Point, holding on to cap-badge rituals and honors. *Personal*, embossed on the envelope in bright red ink.

In plain and simple words the paper told him his contract was about to end. Another month, and the blood that Ben Saxon had spilled for them would evaporate. He would be free to take his pay and his shares and leave his guns behind, free to take a different path at the crossroads.

His gaze turned inward, and Saxon’s lip curled in cold amusement. How could they ever expect him to do anything else but reenlist? It was a joke that they would even ask him. What purpose would a man like him find in the civilian world? The truth was, half the augmentations in him were classed as lethal weapons in more than a dozen countries. If he stepped out, what would happen to him? Would he be stripped down, *defanged*? A predator hobbled so it could fit in with the outside world?

Saxon had never connected to anyone outside; his family was long gone. He had no life beyond the unit, no loyalty to anyone but the unit. The paper made him angry. Offering him the choice was almost an insult.

“*Jefe?*” His attention snapped back to the moment; Duarte was speaking to him, and he’d tuned the young man out.

“What is it?” He covered his moment of reverie by checking his rifle once again.

Sam ran a hand over his shorn scalp, across the wine-

dark lines of an intricate angel design, wings spread across his temples. “These northern guys, they’re tough, yeah?”

“Not so you’d notice.”

The words had barely left his mouth when the deck of the veetol tilted sharply without warning, and a scattering of loose items tumbled away. Saxon grunted as the bulkhead at his back pressed into him, and the straps holding him to the acceleration rack pulled tight, forcing air from his lungs.

The countdown clock read one minute twenty-six; they were still a long way out from the drop point. Another second dropped away and the cargo bay was filled with the dull bray of an alarm.

Amid the sound of it, every member of Strike Team Six heard the fear in the voice of the pilot as he broadcast over their mastoid comms. “*Drones!*”

Saxon’s gut flooded with ice. Flying low and fast kept the veetol well out of the detection envelope of any surface-to-air missiles, but drones were a different story. Autonomous unmanned aerial vehicles, the northern forces had taken to layering them in sleeper pods along the line of the border, where they would sit dormant until something that didn’t match their preprogrammed library of friendly silhouettes passed overhead.

But this sector had been swept for drones. Belltower’s near-flawless intelligence corps had given Saxon the briefing. *No drones. A clear run. Direct line of assault.*

“What the hell?” Kano snarled, doubtless mirroring Saxon’s train of thought.

He turned toward the African in time to see the first of the heavy rounds from the attack drone’s cannon puncture

the hull and the tall man’s chest. Blood misted the cabin’s interior as more armor-piercing shells ripped fist-size holes in the fuselage and flight systems.

Acrid smoke filled Saxon’s lungs as he felt gravity snare the veetol and pull it toward the ground.