



AUTONOMOUS GAUNTLET

AN ARMY BATTLE LAB SHORT STORY

BY JACK SILKSTONE

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Foreword

The character of warfare is changing faster than most institutions can adapt. The accelerating convergence of robotics, autonomous systems, pervasive sensing, ubiquitous drones, massed fires and information effects is reshaping the battlespace into something more lethal, complex and ambiguous than any other point in history. While the Army continues to transform its structures, capabilities and doctrine to meet this challenge, we must also transform how we think. Imagination – disciplined, informed and unconstrained – is now a core requirement of readiness.

Autonomous Gauntlet is offered in that spirit. This short work of military fiction was commissioned by the Army Battle Lab to provoke thought about how contemporary conflict may unfold, how our people might respond under pressure and how emerging technologies may be integrated – well or poorly – into the combined arms fight. Although fictional, the story draws heavily from real trends in modern warfare: the proliferation of autonomous systems; the contest for electromagnetic spectrum advantage; the vulnerability of logistics; the tightening relationship between cyber, intelligence, fire and manoeuvre; and the increasing likelihood that future operations will be conducted amongst dense populations, fragile political environments, and hybrid threat networks.

Fiction has long served as a tool for professional military education. It allows us to test ideas before lives are at stake, explore possibilities before they harden into doctrine, and engage with scenarios that are too dangerous, too sensitive, or too complex to rehearse

in training areas. Tom Clancy's novels shaped Western thinking about Cold War conflict; P.W. Singer and August Cole's *Ghost Fleet* influenced US capability debates; and Australian officers have long used narrative to interrogate future warfare. *Autonomous Gauntlet* continues that tradition – anchoring its imagination in the practical realities of Army's people, platforms and challenges.

Within these pages, readers will recognise contemporary issues that face our Army today: how autonomous systems might be integrated into small teams; how commanders balance risk when technology outstrips tactics; how sustainment becomes decisive when contested; how intelligence networks compete in the shadows; and how junior leaders make decisions with strategic consequences. The story also highlights what has always mattered most: initiative, teamwork, resilience and the willingness of soldiers to fight for their mates under extraordinary pressure.

For commanders and trainers, this narrative offers fertile ground for discussion and reflection. How would your team respond to similar dilemmas? Where are the seams in our current concepts and systems? What frictions emerge when emerging technologies meet old processes? Which parts of this story feels uncomfortably plausible and what must we do now to be ready? Fiction provides the psychological safety to ask these questions honestly.

For soldiers, officers and APS professionals across Army, *Autonomous Gauntlet* is intended to complement – not replace – our formal learning. It sits alongside field training, doctrine, wargaming and simulation as another tool to sharpen professional mastery. The profession of arms demands continuous adaptation. That adaptation begins with a curious mind and a willingness to challenge assumptions. If this story sparks debate in your section, your headquarters, or your mess – if it leads even one team to think differently about their readiness – then it has served its purpose.

The future will not pause while we prepare for it. Continuous adaptation is the only antidote to the rapidly changing nature of war. *Autonomous Gauntlet* is not a prediction of what will come,

but an invitation to imagine what could and prepare ourselves accordingly.

I commend this story to you. May it inform your thinking, challenge your expectations and inspire your commitment to ensuring Army remains ready to fight and win as part of the integrated force.

Ana Duncan
Major General
Commander, Forces Command
Australian Army
02 June 2026

Autonomous Gauntlet

SGT Stew Clark sat in the turret of his M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank with his seat raised so he could see out the open cupola. He watched the sun set over a battle-scarred tropical landscape. Burning vehicles filled the air with an acrid stench and stained the horizon with a smudge that hung over paddy fields and patches of jungle. South Torbia resembled something out of one of the Vietnam War-era movies he'd watched as a teen. He'd had an uncle who had served, and fought in the Battle of Long Tan. A cavalryman, like Stew, his iron steed had been an M113 Armoured Personnel Carrier, a small, lightly armoured, and barely armed vehicle compared to the 72-tonne beast that Stew commanded.

His tank, three others, and a half dozen Redback Infantry Fighting Vehicles were all that was left of Combat Team Talon. A component of the 1st Australian Division, they'd lodged in South Torbia to support a UN-backed mission to dissuade a full-scale invasion by their hostile neighbours to the north. That mission had failed the moment the first enemy armour had rolled across the DMZ and massed artillery had pounded South Torbian forces. Thousands of tanks had pushed south and slammed into the iron fist of the 1st Division.

Over two days of fierce fighting, Stew and his fellow soldiers had held their own before turning the tide. Outmatched by modern armour, the Soviet-era army had broken and withdrawn to a defensive line north of their current position.

"Brew's up, Sarge," said Private Donnie Rayburn as he clambered up the side of the tank and handed Stew a thermos cup.

"Good man," he replied, unscrewing the lid and taking a sip of the warm, bitter liquid. His driver was young but a fast learner; he'd perfected the art of brewing coffee on a gas stove.

"You think the Torbies have thrown in their hand?" asked Rayburn as he leaned on the front of the turret, drinking his own brew.

Stew shook his head. "Nah, man, they're licking their wounds, but they'll be back."

"Any news from Combat Team Sabre?"

"I know they got thumped. I don't know how bad." Sabre was their sister Combat Team, manned by a significant number of their mates from the Second Cavalry Regiment. "How's morale amongst the grunts?" The mechanised infantry company that had merged with their tank troop to form the combat team was from 3 RAR. Their IFVs had borne the brunt of the casualties, with six of their vehicles destroyed or immobilised. Rayburn had gone through basic training with many of them and had used the lull in tempo to check in.

"They're doing OK. They lost some good guys."

Stew checked his watch. "I've got orders in five. I'll get the lowdown then." He glanced at his battle management system. The high-resolution screen displayed the layout of the combat team. It was currently split on both sides of the main highway, a high-speed route that the Torbies had used to punch south into San Jose city. He noted that a friendly icon had pushed well forward of the line of tanks and IFVs. He zoomed in on the map and saw it was a dismounted recon team. *Screw being those guys*, he thought. He finished his brew, checked his notebook was in his pants pocket, and clambered out of the turret. No sooner had he lowered himself to the hull than an alarm sounded from inside the tank.

"DRONES!" bellowed someone off to the flank.

"DRONES!" Stew and Rayburn echoed.

The driver was first into the tank. He dropped into the turret and through a narrow opening into the driver's compartment. Stew's loader and gunner had been napping alongside the armoured beast and clambered up the side. Stew was the last in and slammed the hatch shut.

"Canister up," yelled the loader.

"Recon patrol spotted them first," reported Stew.

"Smart move putting them out there," replied his gunner. "Got us extra time."

The tank's sensor suite spotted the inbound drone swarm and sounded an alert. On either side of them, they heard the dull thud of Redback IFVs firing 30mm airburst ammunition. The 1st Division had both electronic warfare and laser-based anti-drone systems, but those high-value resources were kept in reserve well away from the front; their delicate systems didn't mix well with the North Torbian's love of massed artillery.

"We'd be cactus without those Redbacks," observed Stew. Through his vision blocks, he could see the burst of smoke and flashes of flame as the IFVs' fully automated systems targeted and destroyed dozens of drones.

A second alarm sounded in the turret as drones managed to slip through the curtain of shrapnel and accelerate toward the tank. Stew slapped the AI release, and the remote weapon system mounted on the roof swung into action. The .50-caliber machine gun may have been designed nearly 80 years earlier, but it had never been more lethal. It spat bullets at almost five hundred rounds a minute, and slaved to sensors with a digital mind; it rarely missed. Stew watched as it blasted quadcopter drones from the sky with frangible rounds, sending them spiralling into the ground.

Suddenly, the tank shuddered, and a flash of flame and smoke obscured Stew's view.

"We're hit!" screamed Rayburn. "We're bloody hit."

"Stay calm," yelled Stew. "It's Trophy and the reactive armour. We're OK. We're OK."

As the dust and smoke settled, Stew drew his attention to his Commander's Independent Thermal Viewer (CITV). A little over two kilometres away, he spotted several heat plumes approaching along the highway. "Gunner, Sabot, tank on highway, 2000, On?"

"On 2000," the gunner snapped in response.

"Sabot up," announced the loader.

"Fire," ordered Stew.

"Firing now," replied the gunner.

The tank rocked as the 120mm smoothbore cannon belched death. A tungsten dart lanced down range at well over a kilometre a second. It tore through the turret of a North Torbian tank, detonating the internal ammunition storage and launching the turret skyward like a champagne cork.

"Target destroyed," announced the gunner.

"Target stop," replied Stew. "Next target..." He was about to order the gunner to engage one of the other tanks when, simultaneously, they were hit by the rest of his troop.

"What the hell was that, Sarge?" asked his gunner as the battlefield fell silent.

"Probing attack," replied Stew. "They're trying to find out where we're weak before they commit their counterattack."

"Surely they gotta be running out of drones?" asked Rayburn.

"Not before we run out of ammo. The Redbacks were down to thirty percent before this last engagement. We get hit a couple more times, and we're going to be relying on the close-in defences. It's only a matter of time till they get one through. We need a resupply and we need it yesterday."

* * *

Sixty kilometres due south of SGT Clark's position, a mixed convoy of HX trucks, fuel tankers and armoured vehicles was snaking its way along route AH24 from the South Torbian capital of Manila

toward San Jose city. The 17th Sustainment Brigade of the 1st Australian Division was stepping up from an interim position outside Manila to Fort Magsaysay Airfield, a mere 40 kilometres from the front. From there, they would be able to support the Combat Teams engaged with North Torbian forces more effectively.

The first elements of the Brigade had stepped off from Manila before dawn. Tail end charlie, the hastily assigned Robotics and Autonomous Systems, or RAS platoon, had waited all day before hitting the road. Then, they'd ground their way over a hundred kilometres of battle-scarred highway to reach the outskirts of their destination.

LT Amelia Mooney, or 'AM' as she was known to her friends, tapped her gloved fingers against the edge of the touchscreen battle management system (BMS). The screen, bolted to the dash of her Hawkei protected mobility vehicle-light, displayed icons identifying the vehicles ahead creeping across the map at a snail's pace.

"Holy shit," interrupted her driver, Lance Corporal Ben Haywood. "That's messed up."

A short distance from the road were the burnt-out hulks of a better part of a North Torbian mechanised company. Similar scenes had been spotted on the highway from the outskirts of Manila. However, previously they'd seen little of the vehicle's crew, either having been incinerated by fire or evacuated by their comrades. In this case, half of a human figure hung from the power lines, the body charred and disfigured. The setting sun highlighted the morbid picture, framing it in an orange glow.

"That's what you get for messing with 1 Div," the LT observed bluntly.

"Boss, there haven't been any of our vehicles on the road. Surely it hasn't been a one-way range," asked Ben.

"There's definitely been casualties. Our guys are much better at getting our people MEDEVACED and our gear recovered. Plus, it's been at least 48 hours since engineers cleared the route. They would have backloaded any Redbacks or tanks."

"I guess so."

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the LT reached for the controls of the remote weapons turret that was mounted on her Hawkei. An upgraded system, it housed a 30mm cannon and a suite of optical sensors. Activating the thermal imager, she slewed it left and scanned the ground past the wreckage bordering the road. The destruction stretched to the horizon and wasn't limited to military hardware; entire villages and towns had been pulverised to rubble.

"The intel guy reckons there's still Torbies out there," observed the driver.

"Yeah, and logistics trucks make a juicy target."

"They'll get a surprise if they hit us."

The lance corporal wasn't wrong. RAS platoon was a heavily armed element. It consisted of three sections of ten soldiers: a ground section specialising in unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs), an air section that deployed and controlled unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and a headquarters section responsible for command, control, intel, deconfliction and logistical support to the two operational sections. Each section had an upgunned Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicle equipped with a .50-caliber remote weapon station. Additionally, the platoon had three up-armoured HX trucks packed with their equipment.

"Hey, boss, I think we're there." The driver had donned his night vision goggles.

There was a security checkpoint at the entrance to Fort Magsaysay. Two hulking Boxer wheeled-armoured vehicles were parked on either side of an early-generation Bushmaster. The driver brought them to a halt as two Military Policemen approached.

"Evening, Ma'am," said the sergeant. "What's your unit and call sign?"

"We're 17 Brigade Headquarters, RAS Platoon, call sign Seven Two."

The man checked his notebook. "Roger, ma'am. You need to report to HQ for orders. There's a vehicle park down the road on the right. Your team can wait there."

"Cheers." She updated her people over the radio as they followed the MP's directions and parked up on a debris-covered aircraft apron.

"I'll be back soon. Try not to get into any trouble." The LT grabbed her helmet and rifle and headed across the tarmac toward what she assumed used to be an aircraft terminal. The inside of the dilapidated building was a hive of activity. Staff had boarded up holes, built offices out of plywood, and run cables and computers throughout.

"Where can I find Ops?" she asked someone.

"Down there on the left."

She stowed her weapon at the door and entered the Ops room. A quick scan of the room located one of the Battle Captains, and she made her way over to their desk. The tall officer sitting behind a laptop glanced up as she arrived. "What's up?"

"RAS Platoon reporting in."

His brow furrowed. "RAS? We've got a Recon and Surveillance Platoon?"

"Robotics and Autonomous Systems," she corrected. "We were attached to the Brigade before it sailed from Brisbane."

"No shit. That's good to know." He turned his attention back to his laptop. "I'll bring up the task order."

AM had attended orders in Manila, but they hadn't included any details of what her platoon would be doing once they reached Fort Magsaysay. She assumed that the operations staff had sorted that out in the last 24 hours.

"OK, cool," said the Captain. "You've been force-assigned to the security company. They've set up near the old hangars halfway down the airfield."

"An infantry company?" she asked.

"Negative, Cav. You would have seen their Boxers at the front gate," he said, referring to the Cavalry's 8-wheeled combat reconnaissance vehicles (CRV).

"Right. My platoon offers much more than just augmenting security. We can deconflict airspace for autonomous systems and assist with planning and executing autonomous resupply."

"Hey, save the capability brief for the S3. Come see us in a few days, and we might be able to fit it in."

AM managed a grim smile, "Sure."

The Battle Captain turned back to his laptop, indicating the conversation was over. She left the Ops room, grabbing her rifle on the way out. She was nearly at the exit when another Captain intercepted her. "LT, you got a minute?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied.

Short and muscular with a neatly clipped moustache, Captain Santos didn't look like your stereotypical intelligence officer. AM had met him at the force concentration in Brisbane and initially assumed he was infantry.

"Call me Dave," the S2 replied. "Look, I tried to get you under my command, but the Ops staff didn't like the idea."

"Amelia, everyone calls me AM. Dave, it is what it is. We're a new capability, and no one has worked out how we integrate."

"Well, I've got some ideas. But, for the time being, you're assigned to the security company under Major Powell. He's a competent cavalry officer, but he's seriously disgruntled about being 'shafted,' as he put it, with the security of a bunch of loggies. Don't expect him to explore your capabilities much. I'll try to shape things from this end."

"I appreciate that, Dave. Did you want to establish an informal battlefield chat?"

"Yeah, I'll get your feeds over the BMS plug-in. Flick me a message once you're fully established."

"Wilco, has there been any update on threats on our side of the FLOT?"

Dave shook his head. "Negative, the Torbies launched a probing attack on Combat Team Talon. They're using more and more drones. But I'm not getting much intel on stay-behind elements, SF, and the like. I'm keen to get your team looking into that, particularly in and around San Jose city."

"I've got some additional collectors assigned to my PHQ. I'll get them on it."

"Good stuff." He offered AM his hand. "I'm looking forward to working with you. Once we're sorted here, I'll come down to see your setup."

* * *

Night had fallen, and with it, rain. Drops pattered against AM's helmet as she left brigade headquarters and returned to her platoon. Her Sergeant, Mack Armstrong, a grizzly RAEME veteran, had fitted an automatic retractable awning to the side of his HX cargo carrier truck. While technically an unauthorised modification, it had proven its worth during the torrential downpours that plagued evenings in South East Asia and the relentless sun that marked the day. He'd gathered the platoon's leadership under it, ready for her direction.

Mack had been around the block, a veteran of both Afghanistan and Iraq, where he'd supported Special Forces and conventional troops. Renowned for his MacGyver-like skills, he'd volunteered to help raise the RAS platoon capability, ensuring it had the maintenance and fabrication capabilities critical to its success. He and a RAEME craftsman manned the PHQ truck, which was essentially a rolling robotics and autonomous systems lab.

The other members of her leadership team were three Corporals, two infantry, and one intelligence. The grunts ran air and ground sections, while the int corporal's job was to assist the LT in deconflicting airspace and managing their intelligence collection assets.

"What's the go, boss?" asked Mack as he necked an energy drink.

"We've been assigned to the security company. They're located in the hangars." She gestured with her rifle.

"As I predicted," grunted the Sergeant.

"Let's get down there and find some space. I'll check in with the Squadron HQ, and we'll get our heads down."

"Sounds good. Let's roll out."

There was an array of buildings and hangars on the old South Torbian airbase. Some of them had been damaged by fire, but most remained intact. According to a quick Google search, the base had been abandoned before the conflict. Previously, it housed a Special Forces aviation element. No doubt they'd had a shiny new base built further from the front lines. The Brigade's sustainment elements had arrived well before the RAS platoon and already established themselves. They drove past makeshift workshops, refuelling points, and stockpiles of rations and ammunition. They'd almost reached the end of the airfield when she spotted four Boxer CRVs and a handful of HX trucks parked in front of a row of hangars.

As they came to a halt, a soldier appeared from the vehicles and made for AM's Hawkei.

"You the robot guys?"

AM spotted the crown on his body armour. "Yes, SSM, that's us."

"Good, OC hasn't got anything for you tonight. You've got the last hangar. Get set up and turn in. We're running security for the night. We'll integrate your people tomorrow. Morning stand-up is at 0700, don't be late."

The Squadron Sergeant Major disappeared between the Boxers. AM directed her driver along the line of buildings until they reached the last one. It was an old Anderson shelter with no front doors, essentially a giant curve of rusted corrugated iron. One redeeming feature was that it could fit all their vehicles.

"How do you want us?" asked Mack, over the radio.

"Trucks in the middle, PMVs facing out on both ends. We need to be ready to move if something happens."

"Roger."

"Air Section, let's get a tethered surveillance drone up. Keep it under 150 feet and set an AI watch for military personnel and vehicles. Also, let's get the Hornet pod out and set up. We don't want to get caught with our pants down. Ground section, dismount two of the Uggs; no need for Mules at this stage. We'll man the CP in the Air Section PMV, Mack will write up a picquet list." Her team acknowledged the direction, parked up, and snapped into action. They wouldn't be getting their heads down for a few more hours, but at least they'd be ready if the shit hit the fan.

* * *

"Knock, knock." Captain Dave Santos rapped his knuckles on the side of the Bushmaster and stuck his head inside. "Is your LT around?"

Mack was sitting at one of the terminals nursing a cup of coffee. "Negative, she's over at the squadron's morning standup." He checked his watch. "Should be back any minute. Did you want to wait? We can whistle up a brew."

"That'd be great, Sergeant. Captain Santos, 17 Brigade S2, permission to come aboard?"

Mack shot him a thumbs-up, and he climbed into the PMV and looked around.

"So, this is where the RAS magic happens?"

"Yeah, boss, this is our Air Section command car; we tend to run PHQ out of it as well as the UAS control. Ground section has a similar setup." He gestured to one of the screens. "We've launched a tethered surveillance drone for wide-area surveillance."

"And you're on watch?"

"Technically, but all the hard work is done by AI. We've given it the parameters, and it will alert us if anything pops."

"What range are we talking about?"

"Five thousand metres for a vehicle, less for a man-sized target. Three thousand for a small drone. We can feed that information into BMS for targeting and prosecute it with our Hornet kamikaze drones."

"Very cool."

"How do you have your coffee, Sir?"

"Black with two sugars."

"Bit of a sweet tooth?" Mack typed the order into a chat group.

"Guilty."

"Morning, Dave." AM climbed into the back of the PMV and dropped into one of the spare seats.

"Good morning. How did it go with Major Powell and his team?"

"Your assessment was spot on. He's seriously pissed about not being at the front with one of the battle groups and... he has zero interest in what we can do other than security surveillance."

"Well, that is his immediate problem. Are his people accessing the feed from your tethered drone?"

Mack tapped his screen to open a menu showing who was monitoring the feed. He traced his finger down the list. "They are now."

"Well, that's a win," added AM. "Meanwhile, the other ninety percent of our capability is doing nothing."

"Which is why I'm here," said Dave as one of Mack's team arrived with a cup of hot coffee and passed it to him. "Thanks. Look, the situation at the front is stable, but our forces are spread thin and low on vital counter-drone munitions. It's the 17th's job to get resources forward so the Div can contain the North Torbian Army and force them to the negotiating table. That makes us a priority target for the Torbies, and I think they're going to use unconventional means to hit us."

"Any specific threats?" asked AM.

"Yeah, Special Forces with links to both the South Torbian Communist cells and the Tantoco cartel. But, I've got zero fidelity on where these guys are and what they're capable of."

"Not to mention any splinter elements of the Torbie Army that are still combat effective behind the FLOT," added AM.

"Exactly, a couple of days ago, state agencies released a report indicating a directive was issued from NTA central command placing those elements under the command of their Special Forces directorate. That gives them the authority to reconstitute strike elements that could directly target us, and with significant combat power."

"Now that's a problem set we could get after," said AM.

"Excellent, I want you to focus on San Jose city. It's the major population centre, and its proximity to the DMZ means it was a smuggling hub. The Tantoco and the communists both have a strong presence." He glanced down at his coffee. "Sarge, this is the best brew I've had in country."

"It's a necessity, Sir. The boss ain't her usual lovely self without a good brew. They don't call her AM because of her initials. She's no morning person."

The S2 laughed as a frown formed on the LT's face. "Well, it must be an officer thing. I can't face the world without caffeine, and now I know where to get it."

"Keep that to yourself, Dave," snapped AM with a wink. "We don't want the entire brigade lining up for a brew."

"Will do. Work up a plan to get after those threats." He handed his empty mug to the LT as he climbed out of the Bushmaster. "Oh, you're also going to receive a warning order for a resupply heading to the front tonight. Someone whispered in the S3's ear, and they've tasked you guys with overhead collect."

"I'll get the Air Section spun up."

"Good drills, I'll be back in the morning for another brew."

With that, the Captain departed, leaving the LT and Mack alone.

AM flipped open her notebook. "Give me five minutes to punch out a warning order. Then gather the command team in the briefing tent, and we'll work up a plan to get after it."

"Roger, boss. I'll get someone to bring you another brew."

AM started writing. Despite having cutting-edge technology at her fingertips, she preferred tried-and-tested methods.

* * *

It was mid-afternoon, and the air section was preparing its medium-range fixed-wing surveillance drone for support of the resupply mission pushing forward that night. The blended-wing, hydrogen-cell-powered drone had a wingspan of a little under 2 metres but carried a full multispectral payload with an endurance of over 8 hours. The section had nicknamed it Predatoddler after its much larger predecessor, the MQ-1 Predator.

"How's the preflight going?" AM asked the air section commander, Bryce Damon, an Infantry Corporal with a bent for all things drones.

"Green across the board, boss. We'll be good to go for tonight. Once we get the catapult assembled, I'll have the team prep the second bird."

"Good drills. The last thing we need is a screw up on our first hit out. Are you thinking we launch both birds or hold one in reserve?"

"I was thinking we use one as a relay with the ability to step up on a satellite uplink in the event we lose one."

"What's the delay on uplink versus direct?"

"Five to ten seconds, depending on latency."

"That's significant," observed the LT. "If we run the tethered drone up to four hundred feet, can we work without a relay?"

"If the weather is good, yeah."

"Alright, let's plan for that and hold the second bird on the catapult. Sing out if you need any extra help, and make sure your guys get some rest before tonight."

“Roger.”

AM left the air section in their corner of the hangar and climbed into the rear of their PMV. Inside, her intelligence lead, Corporal Amy Anderson, was working with the rest of the intel team, a SIGINT analyst and a cyber expert. “How’s the brains trust doing?” she asked.

“Good boss, got some solid leads. You want me to run you through it?” CPL Anderson had a link analysis diagram and a digital map on the screens.

She took a seat. “Go for it.”

“First things first, despite the destruction in San Jose city, a lot of the communications infrastructure is still functioning. People are accessing the mobile phone networks and the internet, mainly through Starlink and Bromo.”

“Not surprising, the South Torbians are pretty tech savvy,” said the LT.

“We programmed AI to search social media and map out potential vectors to organised crime and dissident elements. We used the indicators that DIO supplied and tweaked them with some of our own. We’ve got a couple of promising leads. One, I think we should explore.” Anderson nodded at one of the screens on the PMV’s wall. A link analysis diagram was expanded, then zoomed in on a single point: a picture of a man of Torbian ethnicity. “This is Sergeant Michael Torres, a South Torbian policeman with some dubious associations. He’s got connections into what we assume is the fringe of the Tantoco cartel.”

“You think he’s a dirty cop?”

Amy shrugged. “He’s connected, that doesn’t necessarily mean he’s dirty. It does mean he’s probably got access to the people who can answer our questions.”

“Valid, so what do we do now?”

“We could make digital contact and see if we can set up a meeting?”

“Do we have a Tagalog linguist?”

Amy shook her head. "No, but we can use AI to interpret. It won't hit the same way a speaker will, but it could get us across the line."

"Great work, guys. I'll hit the S2 up and see if he's got a linguist. In the meantime, keep digging into that cop's network and see where it leads."

AM left the Bushmaster and crossed the hangar to where the ground team was working. They'd parked their HX alongside Mack's truck, and he was there with them, working on one of the three unmanned ground systems they called Uggs. Built on a six-wheel-drive All-Terrain Vehicle chassis, the Uggs resembled a miniature version of the venerable ASLAV that had served the ADF for nearly 30 years. Armed with a MAG58 machine gun and a 40mm grenade launcher, it was a lethal system that the ground section could control from a tactical tablet or from the command centre in their Bushmaster.

"You guys break one of your toys?" she asked.

"Nothing major," said Mack. "Taking the opportunity to swap out a CV joint while we can. Fully functional, but was starting to show some wear. She'll be back online in the next twenty minutes."

The LT turned her attention to the ground section commander, who was standing alongside her truck with a tablet in hand. "Charlotte, your crew good to go?"

"Yeah, boss, we're just about to unload the Mules and bring them online." The Mules were four-legged robots that were designed to operate where wheeled vehicles couldn't. Agile, they teamed with their operators to move heavy equipment and provide a mobile heavy weapons platform. However, unlike the Uggs, they were far more limited in speed and range.

"Once you've run your checks, make sure you pack them up again. If we need to roll out at short notice, I don't want to have to leave them behind."

Charlotte shot her a thumbs-up.

"Mack, if anyone's looking for me, I'll be up at Brigade seeing the S2. I'll be back well before launch on the mission."

"You going to be in the Cav Squadron command post for the resupply?"

She paused. "Now that you mention it. They've got command, so I should probably be with the OC. You and Bryce can run the mission from here. I'll have you on comms and chat."

"Yeah, the OC will expect a rep, and you going sends the right message," added Mack.

"Good call. Can you get Amy to roll out and test an away kit?"

"Will do. Good luck with the S2, he seems like a good guy. Pretty sure it won't take much to get him onboard with your plan."

* * *

"That's a pretty sharp feed," observed the Squadron XO. He nodded toward the screen that AM had set up to the side of the Squadron's Command Boxer, a turretless version of the hulking wheeled armoured vehicle. Space inside was at a premium, so the LT had brought her own away kit. A trunk containing a fold-out screen, an encrypted workstation, and a data link allowed her to receive the live feed from the air section and communicate with them.

"It's direct from the Air Section command post," she clarified. "Your feed inside comes through BMS, so it's slightly lower fidelity."

Major Powell, the Squadron commander, stepped out of the Boxer, glanced at the screen, and turned to AM. "Lieutenant, the resupply is approaching the outskirts of San Jose city. I want your asset providing battlefield overwatch. I want to be able to see my people."

The LT's brow furrowed. "Sir, we're running AI over the feed to cue us to potential threats to the convoy. If we centre them in the feed, it's going to degrade that capability."

"Miss, I've got a Cav Recon Platoon out on the ground. Finding threats is what they do. They've got their own tactical drones and

sensors. So, you stick to providing situational awareness to my headquarters.”

AM nodded. “Yes, sir.”

She was fully aware of the capabilities of the platoon escorting the three autonomous trucks that would deliver vital counter-UAS munitions to the front. She’d deconflicted their tactical-level drones with the air section and spoken with the on-the-ground platoon commander, confirming that her asset would focus on threat detection farther out. She typed a quick message to Bryce, and a moment later the EO camera flicked over to the convoy, then zoomed out to include a little under a kilometre around it.

The convoy of three autonomous HX trucks was sandwiched between four of the wheeled Boxer armoured reconnaissance cars. Armed with a 30mm cannon, two Spike missiles, and shielded by the Iron Fist active protection system, the Boxer was only slightly less capable than the Redback IFV. A recon troop of four cars was a significant amount of combat power and testimony to how seriously the Brigade was taking the threat.

“How the heck did we get lumped with babysitting trucks?” snapped the OC to his XO. “This is a job for grunts, not Cav.”

“I hear you, boss.”

The two men entered the command Boxer, leaving AM outside sitting at her workstation. Alone, she donned a headset and linked a call with Bryce.

“You having fun, boss?” asked the air section commander.

“The best,” she said, quietly. “Hey, what do you think about launching the second bird and pushing it forward for threat detection?”

“I think it’s a good idea. We’re doing nothing watching the convoy, it’s just war porn for tactards.” Bryce had zero filter. “Give us a couple of minutes, and we’ll get it airborne.”

“Roger.” As AM replied, the feed from Predatoddler flickered wildly. “You see that?”

“Yeah, looks like some kind of interference,” replied Bryce.

The feed continued to flicker, and as AM studied it, she noticed that the three HX trucks in the convoy had slowed and come to a halt. Then the image flickered, and static cut through the picture.

"What the hell is going on?" she heard the OC bark.

"Boss, Amy just confirmed," said Bryce. "That interference is jamming. Someone's hitting the broadcast freqs."

Amy leaped from her chair and ran up the Boxer's ramp. "Imminent threat warning," she yelled. "We're being jammed!"

"Contact!" screamed the speakers in the command car as the Cav Troop Commander reported in.

The OC turned to AM. "Where the hell is your feed?"

"Give it a second, Sir."

"We don't have a second. I've got troops in contact," he belled.

A moment later, the feed blinked and stabilised. "We're online with a five to ten second delay. The onboard SIGINT package indicates that someone is conducting broad-frequency, high-power jamming in the immediate vicinity of the convoy. We're working off a limited satellite uplink."

On screen, they could see the lead Boxers firing their cannons.

"Where are the hostiles?" demanded the OC.

"The TC reports that the call sign is being engaged by heavy weapons and drones from the Northeast," said the XO.

"Get that drone out there and find them," snapped the OC.

"Bryce, you hear me?" AM asked over her headset.

"Yeah, boss, send."

"We're cleared hot to focus on the hostiles. See what you can get."

"Roger."

AM stepped back out so she could see her screen. The sensor slewed to the northeast, and almost immediately, the AI interface started painting buildings with red indicators.

"Bryce, pass those locations to the Squadron CP."

“On it. Ah shit. We’re being targeted. Multiple drones on an intercept path.”

On-screen red boxes were climbing toward their asset. A split second later, an FPV drone filled the screen and then it went blank.

“Sorry, boss, with the lag, there was nothing we could do. We’re launching the second bird. We’ll stand off to mitigate FPV threats.”

“ETA?” asked AM.

“Twelve minutes.”

“Where’s the feed gone?” yelled the OC from inside.

AM took a deep breath and walked back up the ramp. “Sir, our asset was targeted by hostile drones and has been destroyed. We’ve launched a second UAS and it will be on station in a little over ten minutes.”

The OC glared at her from where he was sitting in front of his BMS terminal. “My people are getting smashed down there. I need eyes, and I need them now.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The following eleven minutes ticked by agonisingly slowly. On her tablet, she could see the chat and comms log from the deployed Troop. They’d taken multiple UAV hits and were conducting a fighting withdrawal back down the highway. Two of the autonomous trucks were on fire, and the other was immobilised. The OC’s request to deploy the Brigade QRF had been denied despite having the rest of his squadron ready to respond.

When the second UAS finally reached the target area, the Troop had pulled back five kilometres into a defensive position. She tasked Bryce with circling their position before edging north to locate the HX trucks. She could see that at least two of the Boxers had sustained damage. One of them had been immobilized and was chained to the rear of another.

There was no sign of jamming as they approached, the drone’s thermal imagers locking on to the two trucks that were ablaze. Bryce placed the bird in a fixed orbit over the site, allowing the cameras to capture every angle as it circled.

"Boss, you see what I'm seeing?" he asked over the comms link.
"Yeah, we're missing a truck."

* * *

"Now, this is some Jason Bourne shit," said Captain Dave Santos as he buttoned up a loose shirt over his body armour and checked his Sig pistol before stuffing it into his pants. The Brigade S2 and the ground section commander, Charlotte, were dressed in scruffy civvies in the back of LT Mooney's Hawkei.

The LT was up front. "Comms check," she ordered.

Both Dave and Charlotte were wearing discreet earpieces running to an encrypted radio. The signal would be relayed to a surveillance drone being controlled by the Air Section.

Dave called in, followed by Charlotte; the comms worked flawlessly.

"I'll be listening in the entire time," said AM. "If it gets hairy and you want out, remember the duress word is disjointed. I hear that, and we send in the cavalry." The other five members of Charlotte's team were tooled up in the Bushmaster behind them.

"Roger," said Charlotte.

Dave confirmed with a nod. "We're good to go."

"Alright, I'll see you at the pickup."

The pair left the Hawkei, moved to the HX truck parked behind them, gave the ground section members in the Bushmaster a thumbs-up, and climbed inside.

"We're good to go," Charlotte reported.

"Alright. All call signs, this is Sunray, move now," transmitted AM.

The convoy consisted of the Hawkei, the HX truck, being driven by Mack, and the ground section's Bushmaster. They rolled past the security checkpoint at the front gate of the airfield, turned right and headed north. High above them, the air section was controlling a quadcopter for surveillance.

The meeting had been scheduled at a house on the outskirts of a nearby village. AM had initially planned to go in with Dave, but had thought better of it. Her role was command and control, and Charlotte, with her infantry skills, was better suited to escorting the S2, who spoke fluent Tagalog.

"Sunray, this is Alpha Sierra. We have you covered, over," reported Air Section from the hangar.

"Alpha Sierra, acknowledged. Any luck tracking down that HX?"

"Negative, we'll keep looking."

"Roger, we're approaching the drop location. Make sure you keep an eye on our dismounts."

"Wilco, Alpha Sierra, out."

The convoy approached a junction a kilometre short of a small village. Her driver brought the Hawkei to a smooth halt, counted to ten slowly, and then turned left. A glance at the BMS confirmed that the HX and PMV were following.

"Sunray, this is Golf Sierra One. Debus was successful. We're heading to the RV. Out."

The icon denoting Charlotte and Dave had appeared and was moving in the opposite direction, toward the farm that Michael Torres had chosen as a safe meeting location. AM touched an icon that brought up the camera feed from the air section's drone. An oblique image of the farmhouse and sheds appeared. She noted that no vehicles were present. Torres had told them that the family who lived there had fled south before the North Torbian invasion.

"Golf Sierra One, this is Alpha Sierra, nil activity in the vicinity of target buildings."

On the ground, a hundred metres short of the buildings, Charlotte and Dave crouched in a copse of trees, observing. "Roger, we're heading in," she said.

"Golf Sierra One, your contact's phone just pinged to the north. He should be in your location shortly," reported AM.

Charlotte led the pair across to a dilapidated equipment shed, using the building to block anyone in the house from seeing them. Her experience as a recon and surveillance soldier was part of the reason the LT had given her the task of supporting Dave. Her tanned Eurasian complexion also meant she could pass as a local from a distance. They ducked into the shed and moved between farm equipment until they could see the house.

"Looks empty," observed Dave.

The curtains were drawn, and rubbish had blown against the front door of the single-story, iron-clad dwelling.

"I think we stay put and see what happens when our guy arrives," said Charlotte. "If things go sideways, we can punch out the back of the shed and into the trees."

"Good idea."

"Golf Sierra One, this is Alpha Sierra, vehicle approaching, a grey SUV with a single occupant."

They waited as an early model grey Toyota SUV drove slowly into the yard and came to a halt. The occupant stepped out and glanced around the yard. Charlotte recognised Torres from their pre-mission briefing. He looked like a version of Dave who had skipped the gym and adjusted his diet to consist mainly of fried food. He was dressed in civilian clothes, but she could see the bulge of a firearm on his hip.

"That's our boy. You lead, boss," said Charlotte.

Dave stepped out of the shed first, and she followed, both with their hands open.

"Good weather for farmers," said Torres in Tagalog.

"Only if you're growing rice," replied the S2.

The policeman's face broke into a broad smile, and he offered Dave his hand. "For a minute, I was worried that communists were trying to flush me out." He spoke in heavily accented English. "But, clearly, you're both Aussies."

"That obvious?"

He chuckled. "I grew up in Manila, where you guys are like monkeys in a banana plantation. You run around with all the money screeching for more fruit."

"So, not a fan?" asked Charlotte.

He scowled. "The Commies invaded our country, and it was Australia and America who came to help. You pushed them back across the border, and now we must make sure they stay there."

"Our sentiment, exactly," added Dave. "We need to work out who's supporting them on this side of the lines."

"The Tantoco cartel," said Torres. "Anything that happens underground in San Jose city touches the cartel."

"And you've got an in with them?" asked Dave.

He nodded. "I've got informants who skirt the edges. I can make some enquiries."

"If you can get us phone numbers, we can look into it too."

He nodded. "I'll see what I can do. I can send them through Messenger?"

"That works." The LT had briefed Dave on the unattributable profiles her team had established to communicate with the South Torbian policeman. "Any rumours you hear about the North Torbians would also be useful. We've heard that there are army elements that have remained behind."

"Careful, Torbians love to gossip. I hear fifty rumours a day about the invaders. I'll only send you the ones that might be true."

"We'd appreciate that. And if we need to meet again, is this place OK?"

"Yes, it belongs to my wife's cousins. They won't be back till the war is over. My family is with them in San Pablo."

"If you don't mind me asking. Why didn't you go with them?" asked Dave.

He shrugged. "If I ran away, then who would look after the people who could not leave? Now, I must go." He bid them farewell and departed in his SUV.

"You think he's legit?" asked Dave as he and Charlotte made their way through a banana plantation to their own extraction point.

"Yeah, I mean, he didn't ask us for anything, and I'm sure Amy and her team will be able to validate his backstory and his intel. I note you didn't ask him about the ambush or the missing truck."

"I was hoping he would mention them. It would have given us an indicator of how well connected he is."

"Good point."

They reached their extraction point and sat waiting in the thick vegetation on the roadside. The throaty growl of diesel engines soon filled the air as the convoy made its way along the road and slowed to a halt in front of them. They clambered their way into the back of Mack's truck.

"Golf Sierra One is secure," Charlotte transmitted.

"Roger," replied AM as the convoy started moving. "Good drills. Torres just sent through his first piece of intel. One of his Tantoco contacts overheard some chatter about the ambush. He's passed us their numbers, and the intel team is working on it. Sunray out."

"Nice, boss," Charlotte said to Dave. "You must have made a good impression."

* * *

As the convoy returned to Fort Magsaysay, the air section cut the drone loose. The stealthy long endurance quadcopter returned to the landing area they'd roped off just behind the rear of the aircraft hangar. No sooner had it touched down than one of the operators recovered it, gave it a quick inspection, changed the power pack, and returned it to an equipment case.

Inside the air section Bushmaster, Amy and Bryce were sitting side by side as they worked. Bryce, the Section Commander, was directing the remaining fixed-wing drone as it searched for the

missing HX truck. Amy, the Intelligence Corporal, was working through the numbers the police officer, Torres, had provided.

"Five hours of flying and literally not a single red flag," exclaimed Bryce. "I've checked all the main routes leading away from the ambush site and zero, ziprah, nuffin. It's like they beamed the damn thing up into a spaceship."

"Why would someone with the technology to build spaceships steal a truck?" asked Amy, deadpan, without looking up from her screen.

Bryce rolled his eyes. "You are not helping. The OC of the Cav squadron is blaming us for not detecting the ambush his guys blundered into. The only way we're going to even slightly redeem ourselves is if we find that truck."

"Didn't he direct the bird to watch the convoy itself?"

"No comment. How are you doing?"

"Good, AI is running over the numbers provided by the cop. I want to know if either of them or their immediate associates were in the vicinity of the ambush site last night."

"And?"

"Patience, it's working."

"Tell it to work faster. I'm running out of airtime and it will be over an hour before I can get this bird back up."

"Now that's not suspicious at all," the intel analyst murmured.

"What?" asked Bryce. "What's not suspicious?"

"One of the cop's informants has been taking calls from burner phones."

"How can you tell?"

"I pulled the last month's call log and AI noticed a trend. This guy makes calls to a new number every 72 hours and has been for weeks. It looks like someone's running a schedule on their phones and binning them every three days."

Bryce laughed. "That's pretty old school. I mean, why wouldn't you use a secure messaging app?"

"I'm guessing the Torbies don't trust them. I mean, they're all run by a handful of big US firms. I've got access to most of them."

"OK, so what now? Can you track the latest burner?" asked Bryce.

"That's the other suspicious thing. The phones turn on for short durations at specific times."

"Schedules," said Bryce.

"Exactly." Amy turned to him, eyes bright with excitement. "Bryce, I think we've found something." Her fingers flew across the keyboard, entering commands into the intel AI. "Bingo."

"The latest number popped up on a tower to the south of San Jose City a few hours before the ambush, and again this morning." She kept typing. "I pulled the history of the cop's informants. They've both spent a lot of time in this area. Specifically at a location called the King Rice Mill. I'm sending you the coordinates."

"Roger, got it. Predatoddler is inbound ETA 5 minutes."

The rear door to the PMV swung open, revealing the LT and the Bde S2. "Amy, any news?"

"Yeah, boss, we think we might have illuminated activity linked to the ambush. There's a Rice Mill about twenty kilometres north-east of here that may have been used as a staging area."

"UAS is inbound," added Bryce.

"Excellent work. We need to have it under continuous surveillance. The Brigade is sending another resupply out tonight, and it has to get through."

"Higher HQ assesses that the Torbies are massing for an offensive in the next 72 hours," added Dave. "If the Combat Teams don't get the ammunition they need, they may have to withdraw. They don't have the ammo to survive a large-scale drone swarm attack."

"Boss, I'm not going to have the ability to sweep forward of the convoy and cover this location," said Bryce. "Not unless we step forward with the ground control station."

Dave nodded. "I'll request Div provide coverage for the convoy. It must get through. I'm going to head back to HQ now and get that

sorted. You guys stay on that compound and let me know what you find."

"Will do," replied AM. "I've got to head up to the Squadron for planning now. I'll walk with you." She turned to Amy and Bryce. "Great work, guys. Keep me posted on anything you find. I'll be on comms."

* * *

AM parted ways with the Bde S2 a short distance from the Cav Squadron's hangar. Entering, she saw that the HQ was a hive of activity. Soldiers were stowing equipment, checking weapons and inspecting their hulking armoured vehicles.

She found the OC and his officers at the rear of the squadron command car, gathered around a horizontal planning screen. The OC looked up from the map and gestured for her to join them. "Lieutenant Mooney, I take it you haven't seen the warning order that just dropped?"

"Negative, sir."

"You've been promoted to OIC airfield security. My squadron has been tasked with getting the next resupply safely to the Combat Teams. For the next 12 hours, we will be the Division's main effort."

"That's good news for the front, sir. Did you need any additional support from my platoon?"

He shook his head. "No, I think we're good. The Brigade has assigned you additional assets to secure the airfield. I suggest you grip them up. My XO will handle the handover of responsibility."

"Cheers, sir."

The squadron XO directed her away from the planning session. "Sorry about that," he said once they were out of earshot.

"It's all good. He seems to be in a better mood."

"Yeah, he's itching for a fight, and the closer we get to the front, the happier he'll be."

"The troop from last night? Are they all OK?"

"Yeah, only minor injuries. The mech eng guys are working on the car that was disabled. Torbies managed to fly a drone directly into the power pack. We're bloody lucky it didn't go up in flames. Look, I know the OC was pretty pissed, but no one thinks this is your team's fault."

"I appreciate that, but I should have launched both drones from the start. I won't make that mistake again. Now, airfield security. What do I need to know?"

"I've already emailed through our patrol plans. Brigade has stood up a QRF, chooks in Hawkeis and Bushies. They seem to be OK, lacking in firepower though."

"My ground section can round them out with Uggs and Mules," said AM.

"Oh, OK. Not sure what those are. I'm just going to assume they're not boots and donkeys," replied the Captain. "I'm pretty sure you've got the surveillance side of the house sorted. That fixed-line drone feed you've got running is great. Aside from that, I don't think you guys will have any problems. We should be back within 12 hours."

"With any luck."

"I've got to get back to the planning for convoy security. If you need anything else, reach out on BMS."

* * *

Fifteen minutes after the OC of the Cav squadron handed over security to RAS platoon, LT Amelia Mooney had located the Bde's newly designated QRF platoon. Commanded by a junior Lieutenant, the platoon consisted of two sections of ten soldiers and a platoon headquarters of five mounted in a Hawkei and two Bushmasters. Of note, the three vehicles had traditional weapon mounts, each housing a single MAG58 machine gun, and had been fitted with bar armour to help protect them from drone strikes.

Fortunately, given they had been assigned from the Brigade's signal squadron, they at least had full BMS and radio fit-outs. Having located the soldiers and their vehicles, she immediately repositioned them to the RAS platoon hangar, where Mack allocated a spot for their stretchers and mosquito nets, before he started going over their weapons and combat equipment.

While the QRF was being administered, AM ducked into the air section Bushmaster and touched base with Amy and Bryce. "Any updates on the Rice Mill?"

"UAS has just come offline. Heading back for refuel and then we'll hit it for another six hours," said Bryce.

"I'm pulling apart the informant networks. A bunch of their contacts have been to the mill, but none in the last few days. Also, there's been zero new burner phone activity. It's like they hit the convoy and then faded away."

"That's kinda how this thing goes, right?" asked AM. "We're scratching around looking for the indicators and warnings whilst they're desperately trying to stay below the detection threshold."

"True," said Amy.

"And thanks to our cop mate, we might just be able to illuminate them before they hit us again. Bryce, any sign of the truck at the Mill?"

"Negative, boss. If they've got it under that massive bloody shed, we're not going to see them. I did notice some tracks in the mud, but nothing definitive. They could have a regiment of tanks in there, and we wouldn't know."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of. OK, let's get the UAS back up there ASAP. Amy, you keep digging into the network. See if there's anything we're missing."

"Wow, now this is something," a voice said from the open door to the PMV.

AM turned and saw that it belonged to the QRF Commander, Lieutenant Stevens. "Shaun, jump inside and have a look. I'll talk you through the airfield security measures. This is Bryce, my air

section commander, and Amy, who heads up intel." She gestured for him to take a seat. "We're currently running a fixed-wing wide area surveillance drone. You can see the feed here. It's AI-augmented and will cue us to potential threats. Additionally, we've got ground-based Uggs conducting randomised patrols around the perimeter."

"Uggs, they're the robot buggies, right?" he asked.

"Correct."

"What about the four-legged ones outside? Do you send those out on patrol?"

"The Mules, we can. But we're going to hold them in reserve to augment your force. I'll take you to the ground section after this. They're out prepping some gear."

"Your platoon sergeant introduced me to Charlotte. I'm looking forward to having a closer look at the Mules."

"We can do that now. Then, once Mack is happy with all the gear, we can start running some rehearsals. Ground section is keen to work out how they can integrate," said AM.

"Boss, before you duck out," Bryce said, "I wanted to start sending quads out on wider patrols to augment the tether."

"That's a good idea. Amy, can you have a look at likely staging areas within 10km of the base?"

"Yeah, no problems."

"OK, I'll be with Shaun and his team if you need me."

AM and Shaun left the air section and joined Charlotte and one of her operators, who were working on the four-legged mule robots.

"So, exactly how do you control them?" asked Shaun.

Charlotte tapped a gloved finger against the fold-out touchpad attached to the front of her armour. "I can use this to issue commands to up to three autonomous systems. We call it machine teaming and it means they're running on a level of autonomy. I give them task verbs and they carry out the mission."

She undid a pouch attached to the side of her vest and removed what looked to be a bulky visor. "For more complex tasks, the operator can take positive control and employ the UGS more like

a radio-controlled unit. This device lets me see through the unit's cameras to aim weapons and control them directly."

"You're not going to want that hanging off your head in combat," said Shaun.

"Exactly, that's why teaming works so well. It keeps both the operator and the drone in the fight. I'm going to assign two Mules and a single operator to your call sign. They're configured for anti-armour."

"Good, all we've got are LAWs and forty mike mike," replied Shaun. "Can I use them as a QRF?"

AM nodded. "Yeah, that's my intent. Charlotte will be controlling the Uggs and you guys will deploy the Mules if there is an armour threat."

"Is that what we're expecting?" the LT asked, his voice edged with trepidation.

"Who knows. But, we always plan for the worst case," said Charlotte.

* * *

Rain splattered on the tarmac as AM watched the QRF and ground section running through a response rehearsal. Shaun's three vehicles were moving slowly along the edge of the runway with the two Mules trotting behind them. With a maximum speed of twenty-five kilometres per hour, they weren't exactly fast. They also had a comical high-kneed gait that made them look like awkward, headless deer.

The lead Hawkei came to a halt, and the Bushies behind it peeled off to each side. Their rear doors swung open as they stopped, rapidly disgorging troops who fanned out into a hasty assault line. Her ground operator stayed behind the cover of the armoured vehicles, manoeuvring the heavily armed Mules into cover. Each bot carried a MAG58 machine gun and a pair of antitank rockets. Back in Manila, Mack had managed to scrounge a half-dozen AT4

rockets from the Americans and replaced the lighter M72 rockets they had deployed with. The upgraded weapon was far more effective against North Torbian armour, although god help them if they had to face tanks.

Her radio crackled. "Sunray, we need you in the command car," said Amy.

"Roger, inbound." She turned and jogged across the tarmac, into the cover of the hangar, and headed to the Bushie.

"What's up?" she asked, climbing inside and sitting at her terminal.

"Tip off from the Sheriff." Amy had given Torres the nickname. "Something big is going down. His contacts have told him local gangsters are gathering at a staging area."

"To hit the convoy?"

"He's not sure."

She turned to the on-duty air section member, an infantry Private. "OK, what's our ISR telling us?"

"Nothing on the tether, boss. The predatoddler is just about to come on station at the rice factory, we had a battery issue. Took a little while to fix."

"Ok, cool." AM accessed the ISR tab on her BMS and brought up the feed. The rice factory appeared on the screen at the far edge of the camera's field of view. As it flew closer, the camera zoomed out, and the picture gained detail. As she watched, two vehicles drove across the yard and disappeared into the shed.

"Boss," said the Private.

"Yeah, I see it." As she spoke, a call came in over the system. She grabbed her headset and answered. "Dave."

"AM, we're getting initial reports from the front. There's been a breakout and the Div is scrambling to respond. Hard Rock has ordered an immediate retrograde to the alternate site outside of Manila."

"What about the convoy?" she asked.

"They're marrying up with withdrawing forces to rearm and resupply. The Cav Squadron has been tasked to reinforce the counterattack force."

"So we're it?"

"Correct. Snap orders will be released in the next few minutes, but I can tell you that you're last out in the order of march."

"Dave, we've got indicators that hybrid forces are massing. I think they're going to launch from the rice factory and try to hit us before we can pull out."

"Boss," interrupted the Private. "We've got movement."

AM glanced at the screen and saw vehicles streaming out of the factory. Among them were dual-cab and tray-back utilities filled with armed men. At that moment, the drone's feed shuddered, and the screen turned to static.

"We're being jammed," reported the Private. "The aircraft is returning to base."

AM grabbed the fist mike attached to her body armour. "All call signs, this is Sunray, imminent threat identified, stand to, stand to."

"Dave, not sure if you saw that. We've got hostiles of an unknown amount and type heading from the rice factory toward our location."

"Roger, I'll pass that to Ops. AM, you and your team are the only thing standing between the Brigade and that force. You need to buy the time we need to get key assets out."

"Are we going to get any support?"

"Negative, everything is focusing on the front and containing the breakout."

"Roger."

"Look, I'll push the S3 to cut you some additional combat power, but I don't like your chances. They're focused on getting ammo to the front and moving the key support pieces to safety. That Cav Squadron is currently the only thing between the Torbies and us. Look, I gotta update the Ops team and the Commander. Good luck."

“You too, Dave.”

There was silence in the Bushie as AM considered the change in situation.

Then Mack, Bryce, Charlotte and Shaun gathered at the rear of the vehicle.

“What have we got, boss?” asked the Sergeant.

AM exhaled slowly. “A bunch of SF, gangsters, commies and whatever else are coming to rumble. Bryce, push anything you can to cover that northern approach route.”

“You want to send one of the Uggs out there to give them something to think about?” asked Charlotte.

The LT shook her head. “No, we’re down on heavy weapons. We can’t afford to lose it this early in the fight. We need to keep everyone under the drone defences until the last safe moment.”

“Roger, boss,” said Bryce. “The suicide pod is online, jammers are also deployed and ready for action.”

“People, we’re covering a lot of ground with not a lot of assets,” said the LT. “Let’s stay mobile, stay flexible, and mass where we need the combat power. Hopefully, if we give them a bloody enough nose, they’ll back off, and we can buy the Brigade the time it needs. Right, I’m going to run up to Brigade HQ and see if I can drum up some more shooters. Shaun, make sure you keep your vehicles close to ours. You don’t have any drone defences.”

* * *

HX trucks, recovery vehicles, fuel tankers, Bushmasters and Hawkeis were streaming out of the front gates of Fort Magsaysay as the LT’s driver brought their vehicle to a halt. She paused for a split second, her gaze lingering on the significant number of assets still parked, waiting to roll or being loaded onto trucks. The Brigade would need at least another three or four hours to get most of its equipment moving.

A fighter jet screamed overhead as she entered the Headquarters and made a beeline through the chaos to the Ops room. Inside, everyone was in full combat rig and working frantically to pack up computers and other equipment.

"If it's not mission essential, it gets left behind," barked the Battle Captain.

She walked up to him. "Hey, did the S2 talk to you about reinforcing RAS platoon?"

He turned to her, nodding. "Yeah, something about a possible hybrid threat?"

"Possible?" she snapped. "No, it's going to happen, imminently. I need extra shooters. Anything you can spare."

"Look, I don't have anyone. We're gonna leave ammo, fuel and rations so we have space to get everything vital out. The Cav Squadron isn't coming back and every other shooter is being pushed to the front." He paused in thought. "Look, there's an MP det at the front gate working traffic. I can task someone else to do that. They're the closest thing we've got to grunts. Take them."

"You need to run that past someone?" she asked.

He laughed. "Hard Rock and his staff are on the road. I'm running this shit show for the next hour or so. That det is yours." One of his staff interrupted him with a message; he read it, then issued orders to a Sergeant before turning back to AM. "Good luck, LT. Keep the bastards off us. We need as much time as you can give us."

"Will do, boss." She ran out of the headquarters and directed her driver to take them to the front gate. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and the skies had cleared as they pulled in next to the security point. Nightfall was less than thirty minutes away. She noted that the MP vehicle was an older-generation Bushie that lacked any external weapon mount. AM stepped out. "Who's in charge here?"

A tall, square-jawed policeman stepped forward. Like the other three members of his team, he wore full body armour and a helmet,

with his EF88 slung across his chest and a sidearm on his hip. She noted that one of them was carrying a Para Minimi machine gun.

"That's me, ma'am. Sergeant Barnes. What can we do for you?"

"Sergeant, your team's been reallocated to security, and we've got a credible threat inbound. I need you to grab your people, all your weapons and follow me."

Barnes stared at her for a second before he spoke. "What's the threat, ma'am?"

"We think the Torbies are going to launch a hybrid attack against the Brigade to stop it from resupplying the forward echelon. We anticipate being attacked within the hour." She scribbled a note in her notepad, ripped it out, and passed it to Barnes. "Those are our primary and alternate freqs. We'll give you a minute to sort yourself out, then we'll head to the northern edge of the airfield. You guys will be call sign Mike Sierra."

"Roger, you heard the LT. Mount up."

AM climbed back into her Hawkei and gave the MPs time to do the same. After a minute or two, they popped up on the net and advised they were ready. Then she directed her driver to return to the hangar.

They were halfway when the call came in over the RAS command net. "All call signs, TORNADO, TORNADO."

"It's on," murmured AM as she checked the BMS. Tornado was the alert word for an inbound drone attack.

On screen, she could see threat indicators lighting up as the tethered drone's optical sensors detected and reported inbound drones. There were over thirty hostiles heading directly toward the airfield. According to the BMS AI, the first of them would be on target in less than two minutes.

"Punch it," she ordered the driver, as she thumbed her fist mic. "Alpha Sierra, this is Sunray. What's the game plan?"

"Alpha Sierra, we're going to hit them with the jammers and then the Hornets. I'm recommending all ground units go weapons free on AI and eyeballs."

“Roger, you heard him, team. All call signs, we are weapons-free.”

The RAS platoon’s two mobile jammers had been positioned a short distance outside the hangar. High-powered units, they resembled miniature mobile phone towers. Controlled from the air section CP, they were effective against remote control drones. On command from Bryce, they activated, cranking out focused frequencies to block the command signal guiding these aircraft. Almost immediately, a dozen of the targets plummeted to the ground, blinking off the BMS.

As AM leaped from her Hawkei and sprinted toward the CP, she heard a wave of Hornet drone interceptors spring from their tubes on the air section trailer and scream away into the darkness. The size of a large thermos and driven by four electric-powered props, the Hornets were essentially a flying claymore mine. AI enabled, they were vectored onto their targets by the tethered drone’s feed. Then, when they were within metres of their target, they detonated their payload, spraying ball bearings in a wide arc.

The first Hornets made their intercept less than a kilometre from their launch point. Inside the CP, AM could see the flash of their detonations through the eye in the sky. Moments later, the explosion’s clap slapped her eardrums.

“Did we get them all?” she asked.

“Negative,” reported Amy. “At least eight got through. They’re closing too fast for interceptors. It’s up to the guns.”

The LT’s Hawkei and two of the Bushmasters were fitted with the latest remote weapon turrets. Slaved to the BMS, they could be operated from the air section command vehicle. The LT had already ordered weapons free, and the AI was allocating targets to the three weapons. Everyone inside jumped as the .50 caliber machine gun above them unleashed. It spat bursts of ammunition, shredding fixed-wing and copter drones alike.

“Splash five,” reported Amy.

Outside, the cannon on AM's Hawkei blasted two more drones from the sky. Alongside it, the gunners from the QRF Bushmasters let rip long bursts from their MAG58s. Even with their night vision goggles, the fast-moving quadcopters were hard to see. They managed to damage one; it lost a prop, dipped, spun, bounced off the tarmac, and exploded a short distance from one of the Bushmasters, damaging its front right wheel.

Despite the layered defence, at least one copter got through. It raced across the airfield and slammed into a fuel tanker that was lumbering its way toward the front gate. It detonated in a massive fireball that lit up the dimming sky.

"Jesus," murmured AM as Amy zoomed the tethered camera in on the wreck. "How many soldiers would have been in that vehicle?"

"At least two," Bryce stated.

"We need to be ready for another wave," said AM. "Bryce, get your people reloading the Hornets."

"Already done."

"What are we getting from the recon drones?" she asked.

"They've all RTB'd. The threat force must have deployed its own jammers."

"Boss," said Amy. "If this is a hybrid threat, they're probably going to hit us with indirect and direct fire."

The LT grabbed her fist mic. "All call signs, this is Sunray. Report in."

"Sunray, this is QRF. We've got a mobility kill on one of our PMVs, but we're cross-loading, over."

"This is Golf Sierra, we're good to go, over."

"Sunray, this is Mike Sierra. All good here, over."

AM breathed a sigh of relief. "Roger, you're all still weapons-free on drones. Stay alert for threat elements. We still don't have a fix on their movements yet. Once we lock them down, we'll vector you in." Then she turned to Bryce. "How do we get ISR out there?"

"We've got movement," reported Amy. "Eye in the sky has detected large-scale movement three kilometres north-west of our location. Broadly, that's the location that the drone swarm originated."

"Bryce, we've got to get a drone out there," AM ordered. "Amy, how did they get that close?"

She shrugged. "Heavy vegetation and crappy weather."

AM exhaled. "Well, at least we know what axis they're on. I'm going to head out and coordinate the defense."

* * *

AM slammed the air section Bushmaster door shut and secured it. As she turned to move toward the QRF and her Hawkei, she heard the whistle of an incoming round. The mortar bomb slammed into the side of the curved hangar with an almighty blast that lifted her sideways and threw her against the buckled asphalt.

She barely registered a second bomb impacting as she struggled for breath, her ears ringing despite her headset.

"Boss, you good?" Ben screamed as he dragged her to her feet and half-carried her to the Hawkei.

"I'm OK, I'm OK," she managed as he pushed her inside and slammed the door.

Another mortar bomb hit the hangar, and shrapnel pinged off the truck. She feared the worst before Ben climbed inside.

"That was too close," he yelled as he spun the wheel and gunned the engine.

"All call signs, indirect fire, disperse, disperse," she ordered over the radio. "Acorn, I want a fix on that tube, and then Alpha Sierra, I want it dead!"

"Wilco," responded Amy.

AM flinched involuntarily as another mortar round exploded to their left. A glance at the BMS screen showed that all vehicles except the damaged Bushie were moving away from the point of

impact. Mack even had the trucks moving, pulling back toward western end of the runway.

"Acorn, mortar located," reported Amy.

"Alpha Sierra, Hornets out."

On her screen, icons denoting three of the drones raced away from the launcher. At nearly three hundred kilometres an hour, they covered the distance to the flashing enemy icon in approximately thirty seconds.

"Alpha Sierra, target destroyed," transmitted Bryce.

"Shit yeah," said Ben.

"Sunray, this is Acorn, likely hostile elements detected just north of the runway. I can confirm they're in an assault formation."

"Sunray, this is Golf Sierra, we have eyes on. Can confirm at least forty individuals supported by three technicals in the initial formation," reported Charlotte.

AM confirmed the information on the BMS before issuing her orders. "Golf Sierra, push your Uggs forward and engage. QRF, establish a block in your current location. Use the old refueling point. Mike Sierra, support Alpha Sierra and be prepared to reinforce where required. Alpha Sierra, you are to engage high-priority targets and continue to coordinate drone defences."

It took a moment for her call signs to acknowledge.

"What are we doing, boss?" asked Ben.

"We'll hang behind the QRF. They don't have any drone defences, and we can back them up with the 30mm."

"Roger." As he maneuvered them behind the three Bushmasters, AM zoomed out on the map and saw that the Brigade was still mobilizing. Dozens of vehicles were clustered around the RV point and traffic was backed up along the highway. If the enemy were able to get through her formation, they would lay waste to the mostly unarmed convoy and the Division would lose its first line of resupply. She couldn't let that happen. "Golf Sierra, you are weapons free."

Tracer slashed through the night as the three Uggs opened fire. Their MAG58 machine guns ripped into the assaulting formation, shredding dismounts and vegetation with full metal jacketed ammunition. The North Torbian-led militia dove to the ground, firing their weapons in the general direction of the airfield buildings and the muzzle flash of the Uggs.

Inside the Ground Section Bushmaster, Charlotte and two of her soldiers calmly controlled the three autonomous vehicles, Golf Sierra 1, 2 and 3 using handsets resembling game controllers. The screens in front of them showed high-definition feeds from the Uggs' thermal imagers.

"Switching to 40mm to target vehicles," reported one of the soldiers.

"Ack, I'm down to a hundred on 7.62," replied the other. For all their strengths, the Uggs were limited to two hundred rounds on the machine gun and thirty-two rounds on the grenade launcher. Once they were out of ammo, they needed to be reloaded by hand.

"I'm taking fire," said Charlotte. "MAG58 has jammed. Switching to forty mike mike."

"Tangos are pulling back," reported one of her operators.

"Technical destroyed, down to twenty rounds of 40mm," replied the other.

"Disengage, hold steady, I'm pulling back for repairs," ordered Charlotte as she thumbed her fist mic. "Sunray Minor, Golf Sierra 1 is damaged and moving to your location."

"Sunray Minor, Roger."

Charlotte set the drone on an automated path to marry up with Mack's truck. He'd pulled back with the two other HXs into a holding area toward the southern end of the runway, behind a damaged cinder block building.

"TORNADO, TORNADO," bellowed Amy's voice over the radio.

"Weapons free," followed AM.

Charlotte's BMS revealed another dozen drones coming in from the north east. Amy hit them with the jammers, but they kept coming, telling her they were either fibre optic-controlled or AI-piloted. A wave of icons flashed out from the Alpha Sierra trailer as the Hornets went to work. There couldn't be many of the interceptors left and once they were gone, the remote weapon stations and manned machine guns were all the defences they would have.

The RWS atop the ground section Bushmaster fired a series of short bursts, tearing drones from the sky. At least three interceptors detonated amongst the copters, downing a handful more. The screen looked clear when an explosion rocked the vehicle.

"All call signs, status," ordered AM.

"Golf Sierra, we're OK. One Ugg with minor damage moving back," reported Charlotte.

"Mike Sierra, we're good to go."

"QRF, we're good to go."

There was a moment of silence. "Alpha Sierra, we've taken damage and one minor casualty. The Hornet launcher is out of action."

"Sunray Minor, I need you to get that launcher up. Without it, we're not going to stand a chance against another wave of drones. I'm inbound to your location."

"Roger," Mack replied.

Charlotte stopped her Ugg. It was only a short distance from her position near the hangar. An adjustment to its path brought it to the rear of the Bushie. "I'll fix Golf Sierra 1. You two cover the approaches," she ordered as she grabbed her rifle on her way out of the armoured vehicle.

It was raining again, but she didn't notice as she clambered up onto the side of the Ugg and inspected the belt-fed weapon mount with her torch. A bullet had hit the exposed ammunition box and damaged the link. The gun had jammed when the mangled piece

of metal had snagged on the feed tray. As she cleared the stoppage, a parachute flare shot into the sky, illuminating the airfield.

Charlotte glanced out and saw that the QRF had deployed on the far side, oriented toward the northern end. They were frantically digging shell scrapes and preparing positions on a berm of earth that had previously sheltered an aviation refueling point. Re-focusing on the task at hand, she broke the link, tossed the damaged piece aside, and loaded the gun. Then she inspected the rest of the weapon system. A second round had smashed the control mechanism on the grenade launcher, rendering it inoperable. The entire unit would have to be replaced, but at least she still had the machine gun.

Job done, she turned and saw the LT's Hawkei screaming down the airfield. It raced into the hangar and skidded to a halt alongside the damaged Hornet trailer. Mack jumped out of the rear in full battle rattle with his tool kit.

Charlotte made her way back to the Bushie and climbed into the rear. "Give me an update," she asked as she stowed her weapon, slid into her chair, and activated her Ugg controls.

"The Torbies are massing for another crack," said the operator of Golf Sierra Two.

"Didn't get the message the first time," added the other.

Charlotte checked the BMS and saw several threat indicators flashing immediately to the north of the airfield. She tapped one of the icons, and a grainy image from the tethered drone popped up on the screen. An AI assessment flashed on the screen: *BMP-2 IFV*.

"Oh, shit," she murmured.

"All call signs," came Amy's voice over the combat net. "Threat warning, we have identification of at least one BMP Infantry Fighting Vehicle fifteen hundred metres from our location. Rain is significantly impacting visibility. I assess that there could be up to a platoon of armour in this next assault."

* * *

"Boss, we've still got twenty pallets of thirty mike mike on the tarmac and zero trucks. What the hell do you want me to do with it?" a sergeant asked the 17 Brigade Battle Captain.

The final elements of the Brigade were prepping to hit the road and he was standing in the rain alongside his Hawkei, ensuring no one was left behind. "You got any bang?" he asked.

"You want me to blow it up?"

"Would you prefer to gift wrap it for the Torbies?" he snapped.

"We don't have anyone qualified to blow it. We could set it on fire?"

A heavy machine gun sounded from the northern end of the airfield. Both men flinched as rounds snapped overhead.

"I'll take care of it. Get your people on the road," ordered the Captain. He thumbed his radio mic and established contact with RAS platoon.

"LT, what's the situation down there?"

"It's not looking great," came the reply. "We're about to be hit by BMPs. If you've got anything you can throw our way, it would help."

He grimaced. "I don't have enough people to get all our gear out. Let alone commit them to the fight."

"How much time do you need?" she asked.

"At least another hour to get the last of the trucks on the road. I've got to burn the thirty mike mike stockpile on the northern side. I can't let it fall into enemy hands."

"The Div needs that ammo," said AM. "If they don't get it, they can't counterattack."

"Yeah, but what other option do I have?"

"Leave it to me. My Sergeant can rig it to blow. If we lose the airfield, we can use the explosion as a diversion. I've got to go. Air Section is trying to get us CAS, but there's nothing available."

"Good luck, AM."

"Right back at ya, Sir."

Across the airfield, AM sat in her Hawkei watching the treeline past the runway for any sign of enemy armour. Her radio let her monitor both the Brigade and her internal RAS platoon networks.

"Alpha Sierra, any luck whistling up some fast air?"

"Negative," replied Bryce. "Div has troops in contact across the front. We're low priority at this point."

"Ack, how are we tracking with the Hornets?"

"The launcher is a write-off. We've managed to extract four units that we can hand-launch."

"Roger, priority for engagement is enemy armour. All heavy weapons are to limit engagement to armoured vehicles. Dismounts and technicals are only to be engaged with small arms fire."

Her teams acknowledged the message, while AM considered saying something inspirational. Undergunned and overmatched, there was every chance that they'd take casualties in the next engagement.

"Sunray, this is Acorn," the Intel Corporal interrupted her thoughts.

"Send."

"Sheriff just called in. He's tipped us off that dismounts are massing to the west of the airfield and are going to make a play to seize the remaining stores."

"You're shitting me," AM murmured, before tasking her MP detachment to secure the stores dump.

"Alpha Golf, can you spare an asset to support them?"

"I've got a damaged Ugg I can provide. The grenade launcher is down, but the 58 is functional."

"Roger, make it happen."

AM watched the icons on BMS as the Ugg and the Military Police detachment broke away from the defensive formation and drove back along the airfield, then pushed out to the western edge of the facility. Directing her gaze back to the feed from her RWS, she spotted heat signatures in the tree line.

"All call signs, targets in the treeline. Prepare to engage."

Two battle-scarred North Torbian Infantry Fighting Vehicles smashed through the vegetation at the northern end of the runway with their cannons and machine guns blazing. Tracer lanced out, lashing buildings as the BMPs came to a halt and traversed their guns. Cannons flashed, and one of Ground Section's Uggs exploded in a shower of sparks and flame.

AM hit the left-hand vehicle with her 30mm RWS. The mix of programmable and armour-piercing ammunition smashed into the turret, obliterating its optics and gun mounts. The BMP fell silent as a third vehicle emerged and moved off to its flank. The LT flinched as machine gun rounds slammed into the windscreen of the Hawkei.

Ben already had them on the move as Torbie 30mm rounds cracked through the space they'd previously occupied. They shot rearward into the cover of a building, obscuring her ability to engage any of the other vehicles.

"We're taking heavy fire," a panicked voice screamed over the radio.

"Get me into a firing position," she ordered. The QRF was the only element directly exposed to the assault. Dug in alongside the runway, they were out in the open. The hangars and sheds masked her other call signs.

Her driver nosed the Hawkei around another building, giving her another opportunity to engage the BMPs.

"Hornet's out," declared Bryce as she fired a three-round burst toward the heat smudge of the BMPs.

An explosion flashed on the opposite side of the runway as one of the QRF's two remaining Bushmasters was hit by 30mm fire from a BMP. The armoured vehicle shuddered as rounds slammed into it.

"QRF, what's your status?"

As she spoke, three of the Air Section's Hornets raced across the battlefield. One of them speared off in the wrong direction, its AI utterly confused by the turmoil below. The other two slammed into one of the remaining BMPs. The first detonated against a mesh barricade, but one made it through and detonated against the rear of the weapons turret, silencing the main gun.

With two IFVs knocked out, the third backed into the vegetation to protect itself from drones. From just inside the treeline, it continued to hammer the exposed Bushmaster as dismounts surged forward.

"That IFV is cutting us to pieces," reported Lieutenant Stevens. "We can handle the grunts, but we need you to trash that Bimp."

"Golf Sierra—" she started.

"Already on it," reported Charlotte.

One of the Mules had moved from the QRF along the fenceline. The size of a small pony and thermally shrouded, it was almost invisible to enemies' thermal and night vision. The operator kept it clear of the gunfire being exchanged between the QRF and the assaulting force. Through his goggles and hand controller, he maneuvered it into a position where it was less than a hundred metres from the BMP. Splaying its legs, the robot braced itself, allowing the operator to make a subtle adjustment to its point of aim. When it was aligned, an electronic signal pulsed through the AT-4's ignition system, launching the shaped charge warhead. It hit the side of the IFV, and the warhead detonated, sending a pencil-thin stream of molten steel through the side armour into the cabin. The crew didn't stand a chance. Everything inside the vehicle, including ammunition, ignited, blowing off the hatch covers and venting flames into the night sky.

For the lone Mule, it was a suicide mission. Isolated and exposed, the rocket firing had revealed its position. Militia fighters blasted it with small arms fire as it turned and made to withdraw. Heavy caliber rounds smashed into its composite body, destroying

electrical components. It trudged onwards, wearing blow after blow, until it collapsed on its side, power pack smouldering.

The Mule's sacrifice was not in vain. Not only had it destroyed the BMP, but by drawing fire, it had given the QRF time to consolidate.

Tracer rounds and 40mm grenades lashed the enemy like steel hail, halting their advance. A technical burst onto the runway, its heavy machine gun blasting away in the darkness, only to have an M72 LAW streak across the tarmac and turn it into a blazing pyre. AM scanned the destruction through her thermal imager and thumbed the trigger of her RWS, sending a 30mm burst downrange. Glancing at the BMS, she saw that all but a handful of the Brigade's assets were on the road and heading south. If they could hold out for another thirty minutes, they would have saved most of them.

* * *

As the gunfight at the northern end of the runway raged, the MP detachment were establishing themselves in a low-slung concrete dormitory a short distance from a hangar filled with crates of ammunition. From his position, Sergeant Barnes could see the airfield's rusted perimeter fence and the edge of the township a few hundred metres beyond.

"Plenty of movement," said Nick, the Ugg operator Charlotte had attached to the det.

"People are ducking between buildings." He was monitoring the robot's feed on a small, rugged tablet attached to the front of his body armour. He'd tasked the Ugg with recon.

"Armed?" asked Barnes.

"Hard to tell. Thermal doesn't work great in the rain."

Suddenly, a noise like a jackhammer sounded from the outside of the building, followed by the unmistakable bark of a machine gun.

"Well, I guess that answers that question," said Barnes.

"Do you want us to return fire, Sarge?" asked his gunner.

He shook his head. "They're probing. They don't know we're here. Cover off on a window and wait for my command."

He glanced through the opening he'd smashed in a glass pane and saw figures emerging from the gloom. He wore the latest generation of fused night-vision goggles, but Nick was right: the torrential rain reduced their effectiveness.

"Vehicle inbound," announced Nick.

Barnes's goggles dimmed as headlights illuminated the mesh. An engine roared, and the car smashed through the dilapidated fence.

"Light it up!" he screamed, raising his EF88, illuminating the target with his IR laser, and letting rip a burst.

His team followed suit, blasting the pickup truck with small arms fire. A burst from the MAG58 on the Ugg outside penetrated the windscreen, killing the driver, who slumped sideways onto the steering wheel, causing the truck to roll onto its side and skid along the wet grass.

A lightshow of muzzle flashes sparkled through the rain, and bullets smashed into their building, shattering the remaining windows.

"Take cover!" screamed one of the MPs. An explosion rocked the building as an RPG detonated against it.

Tracer zipped away from their location as Nick jockeyed the Ugg forward and unleashed with its MAG58. His feed shuddered as rounds slapped into the autonomous vehicle, and he backed it into cover before it sustained heavy damage.

There was a break in the fire and Barnes stole a glance through his window. He wasn't surprised to see dozens of figures assaulting through the rain. "One hundred and fifty metres, dismounts in the open, thirty rounds rapid fire," he screamed as he raised his weapon and commenced firing.

For a moment, his team generated enough firepower to overwhelm the assault and inflict a handful of casualties on the militia.

Through the driving rain, they saw the line falter, and then men turn and run back to the cover of the distant buildings.

There was a moment of relative silence before return fire lashed the building, sending them diving to the ground. Barnes heard a scream as one of his team fell, clutching his neck. The man next to him acted fast, crawling to the casualty. As he inspected the wound, an RPG detonated on the outside of the building, shaking debris from the roof. Acrid smoke filled the air.

"Round clipped his neck," yelled the man. "He's gonna be OK."

Barnes shot him a nod as he clutched the fist mic on his vest. "Sunray, this is Mike Sierra, over."

"Sunray, send," AM replied over the radio.

"Mike Sierra. We're up against a platoon plus of dismounts armed with heavy weapons. If we're going to hold this position, we'll need reinforcements."

* * *

AM heard Barnes' message and immediately checked her BMS. The QRF was still sporadically engaging targets to the north of the runway, but seemed to have the situation under control. Both the Air and Ground Section Bushmasters had pulled back to the abandoned Brigade headquarters, where Mack was working to get more of the Hornets online. The only asset that could assist the MPs was her Hawkei or the last remaining Ugg.

"Golf Sierra, hold your Ugg in reserve. Mike Sierra, I'll bring the firepower to you."

"Roger, Mike Sierra out."

The ammunition count on her RWS screen read less than ten rounds remaining. "Ben, get us into cover. We'll reload the RWS, then we'll swing over to Mike Sierra and see what we can do."

"Roger, Boss."

As he maneuvered them into the cover of the air traffic control tower, AM scrolled through BMS, checking on the Brigade's

progress. All their equipment was on the road, but moving slowly. She needed to give them more time.

Ben's drills were slick and he reloaded the RWS through the roof hatch in under two minutes, with AM passing up lengths of the heavy 30mm ammunition.

They had the cannon back in action and had taken their positions when Amy's voice came from the radio speaker.

"All call signs, threat MBTs identified directly north of the Airfield."

"Crap!" exclaimed Ben.

AM's heart lurched into her throat. They'd killed three IFVs and dozens of enemy combatants only to have the Torbies throw tanks at them, right when they were at their weakest.

"QRF, withdraw now," she transmitted. "Alpha Sierra and Golf Sierra cover their withdrawal with whatever you've got. Mike Sierra, hold as long as you can then withdraw back to Sunray Minor's position." Releasing the mic switch, she turned to Ben.

"We need to cover the QRF."

* * *

Lieutenant Shaun Stevens spotted the first of the North Torbian tanks through his night vision goggles. He instantly identified the tank from its rounded, low-slung turret and the distinct 'V' on its front glacis plate. It stopped once it was clear of the trees, its turret rotating toward his position. Heavy machine gun fire snapped over his head, followed by what sounded like a freight train and then a massive explosion. He turned and saw his Hawkei upside down and engulfed in flames.

Firing a burst from his EF88, he screamed at his remaining men. "Fire everything you've got."

AT4 rockets from the remaining Mule streaked across the battlefield along with M72 LAWs and 40mm grenades. Explosions

surrounded the tank as a second of the beasts smashed through the vegetation and came to a halt alongside the other.

“Get the wounded to the Bushmaster!” he bellowed.

Despite the fury of the battle, his active hearing protection still picked up the buzz of Hornet interceptors as two of them screamed over them and dove at the tanks. Explosions rocked both vehicles, and his men cheered. Then, as the rain stripped away the dust and smoke, they saw that both machines were unscathed. Their reactive armour had saved them from the drones.

His radio hissed. “Sunray, this is Alpha Sierra. That’s the last of the Hornets.”

The words struck fear into his heart as he realised that he and his men were alone against the tanks.

“Take cover!” he bellowed as a heavy weapon barked and a diesel engine screamed. Tracer fire lanced across the runway, hitting one of the tank turrets impacting in a shower of sparks. Off to the flank, he spotted AM’s vehicle as it dashed across the runway with its RWS spitting metal at the heavy armour.

A tank belched flame, but the round missed the speeding Hawkei as it blasted with its chain gun. Smoke billowed up from the ground as AM’s vehicle roared toward his position.

“Shaun, your people need to be ready to move. Get the wounded in the Bushie and my truck, and let’s get the hell out of here!” AM screamed over the radio.

The Lieutenant didn’t need to be told twice. His wounded were already loaded in the remaining vehicle, which was sheltered behind the double berm of the refueling point. He abandoned his position atop the berm as the Hawkei skidded in alongside the Bushmaster. He reached the back of the Bushie and peered inside. Two men were lying on the floor in an array of blood and bandages. His medic glanced up at him for a moment then went back to work. The walking wounded lined the vehicle on both sides. Soldiers with limbs bandaged looked shell-shocked, faces pale and scared.

"Find some space, outside or in. We're getting the hell out of here!" bellowed AM, from the door of her battle-scarred Hawkei.

"You heard her!" he yelled, slamming the door shut on the Bushmaster.

He glanced at his destroyed Hawkei. Two members of his Platoon headquarters were still inside the burning hulk. They'd have to come back for their bodies if anything remained.

"Sunray, this is Sunray Minor. We're holding at the ammo dump. Mike Sierra is falling back to our location. We're prepped for evac." The radio call snapped Shaun into action. He slung his rifle and joined his men as they clung to the slat armour on the outside of the Bushmaster.

"Sunray, roger. We're inbound. QRF, take the lead. We'll cover you." Shaun slapped the side of the driver's window and the man responded with a thumbs-up through the rain-splattered glass. He gunned the engine, and they moved off smoothly, heading away from the fuel point, keeping it between them and the advancing tanks. Through the smoke and rain, he could see flashes of flame as the tanks fired randomly through the smoke. Either the LT's fire had damaged their thermal imagers or the fog and rain were hampering their effectiveness.

* * *

Thirty-five kilometres southwest of Fort Magsaysay, a flight of two USAF F-35As was heading north in support of the 1st Division's attempt to counterattack the North Torbian forces. A pair of Loyal Wingmen supported each aircraft. The MQ-28C, or Ghost Bat Evolved, was an autonomous aircraft designed to augment the capabilities of its partnered manned jet. In this case, the four drones were laden with GBU-39 small-diameter glide bombs to provide Close Air Support (CAS) to the beleaguered ground forces.

"Shazam, you getting this CAS request?" the lead pilot asked.

"Yeah, Boomer. Off to the East. Call sign isn't a JTAC, looks like a UAS operator. They've dropped a nine-liner directly into MADL." He referred to the Multifunction Advanced Datalink, the network through which the F35s shared threat and situational awareness data. He glanced at the touch screen interface used to issue commands to his Loyal Wingman. A new option had appeared, allowing him to assign one of his drones to the UAS call sign.

"I didn't think that was up and running yet," replied his wingman. "You wanna connect with them?"

"Yeah, let's see if we can help them out." Boomer toggled his radio switch. "Alpha Sierra One Six, this is Lightning One Four, over."

The reply came in a split second. "Lightning, this is Alpha Sierra, request immediate CAS, we are under attack from North Torbian heavy armour."

"Roger, Alpha Sierra, I am assigning you control of MQ-28 Lightning One Four Two. Please play nice with my toy and return it as you borrowed it." Boomer took his hand off the stick and tapped the relevant command button on his touch screen. Glancing over his right, he watched as one of his Loyal Wingmen peeled off.

"Lightning One Four, much appreciated. I'll return your bird ASAP, less fuel and bombs. Feel free to bill the 17th Sustainment Brigade for anything we use."

"Alpha Sierra, as long as you're slapping Torbies, we're all good."

* * *

"Covering!" Barnes yelled as he pumped the trigger of his rifle. He was the last of the MPs to pull back from the barracks to the cover of another building. Lashed by rockets and gunfire, the former soldiers' accommodation was a smouldering wreck.

To his right, the Ugg's MAG58 barked, his signal to pull back. He tossed a smoke grenade toward the barracks, waited for it to

plume and dashed to the amenities block where the rest of the team was positioned.

Rounds cracked past him as he zig-zagged toward the building. Suddenly, something hit him from behind, driving the air from his lungs and slamming him face-first into the ground. His first thought was that he'd tripped, but the burning pain in the middle of his back confirmed the worst. He'd been shot.

"We've got you, Sarge." The voice sounded distant.

The MAG58 barked again, closer this time and more earnest. Someone grabbed him and dragged him face down through the mud and into cover.

A diesel engine rumbled as one of his men rolled him onto his back and stripped his helmet and body armour. His breath returned as hands raked his back and torso.

"I'm OK, I'm OK," he managed as a fifty-caliber machine gun hammered.

"Stay still."

"I said I'm OK." He sat up, rubbing the side of his jaw where it had slammed into the ground.

The .50 caliber pounded again. He glanced over to where it was firing from and saw a solid block that could only be a Bushmaster.

"Backup," he murmured.

"Boss, thought you were cactus." His man had a small flashlight and was shining it on the back of his armour. His backpack was shredded, and the ceramic plate was exposed and fractured.

"Give me that." He tossed the damaged armour over his head, fastened it, and reached for his helmet. "We need to fall back to the RV point near the ammo dump. If we get flanked by those tanks, we're completely cut off. Get the team to the Bushie."

More gunfire sounded from the direction of the barracks. The Bushmaster's .50 cal hammered out a reply. Behind it, Nick was unloading boxes of ammunition to load the Ugg's machine gun. Charlotte jumped from the rear and sprinted to where they were hunkered down. "Barnes, you OK?"

He shot her a thumbs-up.

"We're getting low on ammo. We need to get your people out, now!"

"We'll be right behind you!" he yelled as the Bushies' heavy machine gun let loose another burst. She turned and ran back to the armoured vehicle, pausing as Nick climbed in. Barnes ran across when they were both inside. Crouching at the door, he counted his people in before entering. Then, with a roar, the Bushie reversed away from the barracks, its machine gun laying down fire. From inside, Nick controlled the Ugg, its machine gun adding to the covering fire.

"Did the QRF get out?" asked Barnes as he wedged himself on the floor between the seats. Everyone was reloading magazines from ammunition liners beside him.

"Yeah, but we've got casualties."

"How bad?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't been able to raise Sunray. Her last orders were to pull you guys back to the warehouse. If the situation doesn't improve rapidly, we're going to blow the ammunition store and head south. I've got the charges with me." Barnes flinched as rounds struck the Bushmaster's armour. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

* * *

"Boss, CASEVAC is inbound," reported Mack. "ETA fifteen minutes." The platoon sergeant had established a casualty collection point behind the abandoned headquarters position.

AM nodded grimly and glanced up at the night sky. It had finally stopped raining, and while that would improve visibility for the enemy, it also meant that the American autonomous CASEVAC birds could fly unhindered. She'd established the QRF in a security position oriented down the runway with Ben manning her Hawkei. The 30mm was the only real firepower the platoon had left.

She exhaled. "Mack, what's our count?"

"We've got two Pri ones and three Pri twos. The medic has stabilised the ones, but if that CASEVAC gets called away, they're not going to make it."

"And KIA?"

"Two, the crew of the Bushmaster that was hit."

The fact that the two soldiers weren't members of the RAS platoon didn't make the loss any easier. She may not have known them personally, but they'd died under her command.

Mack grasped her shoulder. "Boss, it's chaos, I get it. But you've got soldiers who are counting on you to keep them in this fight."

"I'm on it." She left him to manage the casualties and jogged across to Air Section's Bushmaster. Rapping her knuckles on the door, she waited for it to open. Amy and Bryce were inside; the rest of their team was out reinforcing the QRF.

"Boss, your radio's fried. I've been trying to raise you for the last few minutes," barked Bryce. "We've got CAS inbound. I'm trying to get a clear feed from a tactical drone." He returned to his console.

AM climbed inside, closed the door, and stood behind him. His onscreen feed was grainy and rain streaked. The drone was one of Air Section's Small Unmanned Aerial Systems (SUAS), a short-range, short-endurance platform that lacked the capabilities of the Predatoddler.

"There." Bryce zoomed the camera in, revealing two tanks and a half dozen other vehicles massing on the far end of the runway. "Looks like they're getting their shit together for another assault." He stabbed a finger at his second screen and designated a kill box in the area where he'd spotted the Torbians. He allocated the box to Lightning 142.

"Job, done!"

"Are you talking to the airframe?" asked AM.

He shook his head. "Nope, it's completely autonomous. Ghost Bat has its own onboard AI. I've told it to kill everything in the box."

His MADL interface showed an icon indicating the aircraft was only five kilometres away, less than half a minute until it was on target. Cruising at ten thousand feet, there was no way they could hear it inside the armoured vehicle. The four GBU-39 smart bombs that it unloaded were another matter altogether.

They saw the impact through the tactical drone's feed. A series of flashes completely overwhelmed the infrared sensor, blacking out the screen. A split second later, the sound of the detonations reached them. Then the SUAS feed adjusted, revealing a scene of complete carnage. One of the tanks was a flaming pile of twisted metal. The other had popped its turret and was a raging inferno.

AM was thankful that the feed wasn't of high enough quality to reveal the damage the blasts had done to the dismounted soldiers. It was enough to see their vehicles shattered and ablaze.

"Good work, Bryce. You saved our asses."

He shook his head. "Negative, you can thank the United States Air Force for that save." He ripped his radio from its pouch and handed it to her. "I've got another one in the cab. You need to sort out the western flank."

"Can we push the drone over and try to target them?"

"I'll move the UAS, but the Ghost Bat has already been re-assigned. I'll put in another call for CAS."

"Roger." She removed her radio and replaced it with Bryce's. "Golf Sierra, what's your status?"

It took a moment for Charlotte to reply. "Golf Sierra, here. We've pulled back to the ammunition depot. Enemy forces are massing to the north, and we're expecting to be attacked at any moment. If you've got any spare firepower, now would be the time."

AM conducted a quick review of her forces. The QRF had been badly mauled and was down seven soldiers. Another four were working with Mack to stabilise the casualties. The rest of them were

digging in to fend off any forces that had survived the airstrike. Her Hawkei was the only real firepower they had, and she didn't want to commit that without knowing what else was out there.

"Golf Sierra, sit tight, I'll find you something ASAP." She tapped Bryce on the shoulder.

"Can you push the SUAS over there and see what we're up against?"

"Can do." He adjusted the aircraft's flight track and aimed the camera west of the airfield. The picture on his screen revealed several burning vehicles and buildings. Among them, he could see combatants moving cautiously through the compromised perimeter fence.

"Boss, this doesn't look good."

"Zoom out," said AM.

As the camera panned out, flashes appeared to the left of the advancing Torbian forces.

"What the hell?" said Bryce. "Someone else is shooting at these guys."

"Amy, can you contact the Sheriff?" asked AM.

"On it."

"You think that's the cops?" asked Bryce.

She shrugged. "Who else is there?"

"South Torbians?" replied Bryce.

"A bit late to the party," said AM as she activated her radio. "Golf Sierra, be aware that someone is hitting the Torbies from their western flank. I'm moving to your location now."

"Boss, I can't raise Sheriff, but his device is pinging off a tower to the north west," said Amy. "I'll keep trying to contact him, but I assess that he's almost certainly involved in attacking the hostile element assaulting Golf Sierra."

"Keep me posted. Bryce, keep trying for CAS."

"Will do, boss," said Bryce. "Our CASEVAC birds are ten miles out. I'll pass it on to Mack."

AM left the Bushmaster, jogged across to her Hawkei, and directed Ben to move them towards Charlotte's position. A moment later, he brought the vehicle in alongside Ground Section's Bushmaster. A quick scan through the RWS thermal revealed there were currently zero hostiles targeting their position. Slipping out of the truck, she moved to the rear of the Bushie where she found Charlotte and Barnes.

"The attack has taken the pressure off us," stated the section commander. "Torbies look to be reorienting west to face the threat."

"Amy reckons it's your mate Torres," said AM. "A local cop who's been feeding us intel," she clarified for Barnes.

"Cops won't last long against what's been hitting us," added Barnes. "These cats are heavily armed."

Charlotte nodded in agreement. "We need to back them up. Boss, with your gun car in the mix, we've got the firepower to send the Torbies packing."

"We'll back you up," added Barnes.

AM considered the option. "Let's push your Ugg forward and back it up from the vehicles. If we see an opportunity, we'll hammer it. But, let's not put any of our people in more danger than we have to."

"Let's do it," said Charlotte.

"Alpha Sierra, what's the situation look like from above?" asked AM as she jumped in the Hawkei.

"Looks like a full-blown gunfight between the cops and the Torbies," replied Bryce. "Amy has contact with the Sheriff. He's got another dozen of his tactical guys, and they're holed up in two houses. The Torbies are moving towards them."

"Roger, we're going to push forward and support." AM watched her screen as the Ugg moved forward. It quickly pushed out to the burning building, where Barnes and his people had made their initial stand.

Once clear of the building, the Ugg identified targets engaging the police position to the west. Its MAG58 blasted a Torbie technical, killing the machine gun operator and driver.

“Move up,” AM ordered.

Ben kept the Hawkei alongside the Bushmaster as they rolled slowly forward.

“Alpha take twelve o’clock to three o’clock. I’ll cover twelve to nine,” she ordered. Through the RWS’s thermal imager, she identified a fire team using a low wall as cover. A burst from her cannon turned them into a haze of rapidly cooling debris.

Alongside her, the fifty on the Bushie added its distinct thud to the orchestra. They’d caught the North Torbians woefully exposed as they attempted to target the police forces who’d launched their own attack.

“This is our limit of exploitation,” ordered AM. “Acorn, have Sheriff and his people hold firm. I don’t want them in our engagement area.”

“Acorn, roger,” replied Amy.

AM traversed her RWS left and spotted a cluster of heat signatures in a building. That had to be the cops. She watched for a moment as they fired on the North Torbian forces before she panned back to the enemy. The ragtag force of criminals, militia, and possibly Special Forces looked to be attempting a withdrawal. Sporadic fire was ping-ponging off the Hawkei’s armour as she engaged with the cannon. Careful to conserve ammunition, she fired short bursts to encourage the retreat.

“Check fire,” she ordered a moment later.

AM scanned the carnage through the RWS thermal imager. The battlefield was littered with burning vehicles, broken bodies, and abandoned weapons. Seeing no sign of movement, she keyed her radio.

“Acorn, this is Sunray, I want you to coordinate with Sheriff. Get his people to evacuate any wounded back to our casualty collection

point. Make sure Mack has an RV procedure; we don't want a blue on green."

"Roger," replied Amy.

"Acorn, out to you. All call signs, this is Sunray. We're falling back to the Platoon position."

* * *

AM stepped from the Hawkei and looked into the night sky as the dull thud of the CASEVAC's helicopter blades reached her ears.

The autonomous U-Hawks came in fast and flared over the landing zone that Mack had marked alongside the runway. Two of them touched down, their noses lifting to release wheeled casualty transporters and medics.

"Ben, keep scanning with the RWS," she ordered before closing the door and moving across to the casualty point.

Mack met her as the team's medics handed over their patients to the US Combat Medics.

"They're going to make it, boss."

"Thank god," she said. "Were any of the cops injured?"

He shook his head. "They're still on their way in, but Amy said they haven't reported any casualties."

"Lucky for them. What's our ammo status?"

"We're running light on everything but your thirty. There's a ton of that in the stockpile. We've got enough seven six two for the remaining Ugg, but almost winchester on five five six and nil anti-armour weapons."

"We need to decide to go or stay," she said. "According to BMS, the Torbie assault has been stopped about thirty kilometres north of here. Losses looked pretty heavy on our side. I'm not sure how long the Div will hold them."

"They're going to need this ammo, boss."

"Yeah, but we can't hold out against another attack."

Behind him, the medics had transferred the two priority-one casualties onto their casualty transporters and were loading them into the waiting U-Hawks followed by the lower-priority wounded.

Suddenly, the beat of rotors filled the air as more helicopters thundered overhead.

“Sunray, this is Alpha Sierra. We’ve got friendly assets inbound,” reported Bryce over the radio. “I’m pushing our tactical UAS north to allow them to land.”

“Roger, who are they?” she asked as she watched the choppers through her NVGs.

“One of our infantry companies,” he replied.

She let out a sigh. “Well, that solves that problem. Mack, we’d better welcome our guests.” They walked back to her Hawkei and waited as the airmobile operation unfolded on the grass apron to the east of the runway.

Behind them, the CASEVAC birds lifted off, and a moment later, three Blackhawks touched down and deposited what looked to be a platoon’s worth of heavily armed grunts who fanned out to secure the LZ. They were closely followed by four twin-rotored Chinooks that disgorged the rest of the Company, complete with Polaris ATVs laden with Javelin missiles. Teams speared out in what was a well-rehearsed activity, establishing security points in all directions.

In less than two minutes, the amount of friendly firepower at Fort Magsaysay airfield had quadrupled. Armed with Javelin missiles, FPV drones, heavy machine guns and automatic grenade launchers, the Rifle Company was more than capable of securing the ammunition holdings against another hybrid assault.

A squad detached itself from the formation and made its way toward the Hawkei. “Team, welcome to Fort Magsaysay,” said AM.

A short, compact officer with a bushy moustache thrust a gloved hand toward her. “LT, I’m Major Brian Savage, OC Delta. We were told that the entire sustainment brigade had pulled out.”

She gripped his hand. "Amelia Mooney. No, sir, RAS platoon covered the withdrawal and held the line."

"RAS?"

"Robotics and Autonomous Systems," she clarified.

"You see any action?"

AM nodded. "Yes, sir, you could say that."

"Good stuff. Well, we'll be taking over security now. You and your team have done outstanding work."

"Thanks, sir. It's been a tough night. Once your people are firm, I'd like to request a mortuary team. We've got KIA still in the field."

"You took casualties?"

"Four KIA," confirmed Mack. "They made a damn good account of themselves. We were attacked by a hybrid force of at least company strength, reinforced by tanks and APCs."

Despite a thick layer of camouflage cream, there was no hiding the look of shock on the Major's face. "You held off a reinforced company with a platoon?"

"We had reinforcements," clarified AM. "A platoon minus of sigs and an MP det."

"I wouldn't call that reinforcements," added one of the OC's team, the CSM.

AM fixed him with an icy glare. "If it weren't for them, Fort Magsaysay and most of 1 Div's ammunition holdings would now be under Torbian control."

"Ma'am, no disrespect meant," replied the CSM. "Up against tanks, I would have expected you to be allocated more firepower."

"Firepower isn't something a Sustainment Brigade brings to the fight," added Mack.

"That didn't hold you back," said the OC. "LT, if you give me a rundown of your positions, we can get your people off the wire."

AM nodded. "Let's get it done."

Three hours later, AM leaned against her battle-scarred Hawkei, watching the sun rise to the east of the runway. The view was almost picturesque despite the haze of smoke from burning vehicles. She

heard a noise behind her as someone approached. It was Mack. He handed her a mug of hot coffee and stood silently beside her, drinking his own brew. Moments passed before he spoke. “Well, that was one hell of a proof-of-concept demonstration.”

About the Author

Jack Silkstone grew up on a steady diet of Tom Clancy, James Bond, Jason Bourne, Commando comics, and the original first-person shooters, Wolfenstein and Doom. His background includes a career in military intelligence and special operations, working alongside some of the world's most elite units. His love of action-adventure stories, his military background, and his real-world experiences combined to inspire the no-holds-barred PRIMAL series.

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AUTONOMOUS GAUNTLET

AN ARMY BATTLE LAB SHORT STORY

BY JACK SILKSTONE

When a simmering border conflict erupts into full-scale war, Australia's 1st Division is thrust into a brutal fight across the shattered landscape of South Torbia. Cut off, outnumbered, and relentlessly targeted by drone swarms, electronic attack and hybrid adversaries, the frontline forces must hold their ground – or risk the collapse of the entire front.

At the centre of the chaos stands Lieutenant Amelia Mooney and her newly formed Robotics and Autonomous Systems Platoon. As enemy forces blend state armour, criminal networks and insurgent fighters into a lethal web, her team must integrate untested technology under fire and out-think an adversary that adapts as fast as they do.

Gritty, fast-paced, and alarmingly plausible, Autonomous Gauntlet thrusts the reader into the brutal reality of contemporary war – where every soldier is a sensor, every vehicle a target and every decision a race against time.



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