



BRIAN FALKNER

TASK FORCE

RECON TEAM ANGEL: BOOK TWO

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BOOK ONE – THE ISLAND

We celebrate our military victories, but try to forget our failures. Operation Magnum, however, will never be forgotten. More than a failure, it was a glorious disaster.

General Harry Whitehead

CHUKCHI PENINSULA

The army camped on the Chukchi Peninsula in far north-east Russia was the largest assembled in the Bzadian War, poised for the greatest invasion in Earth's history.

The build-up took several months, but by the end of November 2031, 7,000 rotorcraft; 5,000 jet aircraft, including 800 of the formidable and heavily armed 'Dragons'; 35 tank battalions; and 60 full infantry divisions – over a million Bzadian soldiers, complete with artillery and logistical support – occupied the inhospitable and frozen wastelands of the peninsula and waited for winter.

Less than a hundred kilometres away lay Alaska and the pathway to the Americas.

As soon as the turbulent waters of the Bering Strait turned to ice, the invasion of the Americas would begin, and with it the beginning of the end of the human race.

On the other side of the strait, human defence forces also waited. Seven years of warfare against the mighty Bzadian army had shattered Earth's defences and little more than a thin crust was ready to oppose the invasion.

For the aliens, the invasion could not come soon enough. The massive army was a ravenous beast that needed constant feeding. Over 30,000 tonnes of food and supplies were being trucked into the peninsula each day. Fuel was another issue. The huge battle tanks would use up a fuel cell in two days, the mighty dragons in just eight hours.

In the Americas, military commanders did what they could to prepare for the coming holocaust. On December 10, in the war room at the Pentagon, representatives from twelve nations – those that still had any significant military capability – made what plans they could.

General Elisabeth Iniguez, the Commandant of the US Marine Corps and a member of the US Joint Chiefs

of Staff, was the instigator of what came to be called “Operation Magnum”.

General Iniguez, a fiery redhead, stood up and slammed her hand down on the table.

“Invade us? Invade us!” she cried. “How about we invade them! Those alien sons of bitches.”

The plan was an audacious one, never before attempted in this war or any other. An attack in the heart of New Bzadia (formerly known as Australia). It called for a multinational amphibious Task Force to sail down the Brisbane River right under the noses of the aliens. The target was the fuel-processing plant at Lowood.

Without the constant flow of fresh fuel cells, the Bzadian army would be paralysed. By the time they could repair the plant, or build a new one, the winter would be over, and the threat of invasion gone for another year.

The plant was heavily protected by ground-to-air missile batteries, which ruled out an air or missile

attack. The Bzadians had learned their lessons from Uluru.

But an even bigger problem was the Amberley Air Base.

The massive Bzadian air force base, located near Ipswich, was formerly the largest base of the Royal Australian Air Force. It was one of only three major air bases in Australia still with its full complement of rotorcraft and fighter jets. All the other bases were operating at minimum levels, as their aircraft had been shipped to Russia to support the coming invasion of the Americas.

Amberley, and its massed aircraft, had to be taken out of action for the operation to proceed.

General Iniguez knew that everything depended on destroying the air base. If not, then the entire expeditionary force would be wiped out. In her opinion, Operation Magnum was going to be either the biggest triumph of the war, or the biggest catastrophe.

As the meeting broke up, General Harry Whitehead, the Supreme Commander of ACOG, tall, grey-haired and quietly spoken, took Iniguez aside and asked, “Are you sure this can be done?”

Iniguez replied, “I believe so, sir.” She looked closely at him and said, “But we’ll need Angels on our shoulders.”

BARRACUDAS

[Mission Day 1, December 31, 2031. 1725 hours local time]

[Virginia Class Submarine: USS JP Morgan, off the east coast of Australia]

“Bring her up to sixty feet.”

“Sixty feet, aye. Pump from number one auxiliary to sea.”

“Very well. Bring her up slowly. Sonar?”

“All clear.”

“Showing sixty feet and steady.”

“Come to two eight five. Slow ahead both.”

“Two eight five, aye. Pump-jets one and two answering slow ahead both.”

“Very well. Vent and flood LOT.”

“Lockout trunk venting and flooding, aye.”

Inside the lockout trunk, Lieutenant Ryan Chisnall pressed his full-face mask firmly to his skin as air hissed out of the chamber and cold seawater rose rapidly around him. There was no need, the mask was well secured. It was just habit.

Lights in the chamber began to dim. The shapes of his five Angel team members faded into the background, then disappeared completely.

He flicked the night-vision switch on the side of his mask and the interior of the chamber took on an unearthly green glow, his teammates now black ghosts silhouetted against it.

The lockout trunk, a staging area built into the submarine, was for US Navy Seals, allowing them to deploy without the submarine needing to surface. It was designed for nine adults, and for six small teenagers it seemed quite spacious. Plenty of room for a party. But the six teenagers in this room were not here to party.

“Buddy up and check equipment,” Chisnall said, as the last of the air hissed out of the chamber. He was now enclosed in a metal box, well below the surface of the ocean, with only breathing apparatus to save him from a certain, horrible death.

It didn't concern him. Nothing much concerned him nowadays. Not since Uluru.

The bulky shape of Specialist Janos "Monster" Panyoczki turned to the much smaller, willowy form of Sergeant Trianne "Phantom" Price and his hands began moving over the hoses and knobs of her rebreather kit. She pulled away from him briefly, then relaxed, with a quick glance at Chisnall, and allowed Monster to complete the check.

Specialist Retha Barnard, a stocky fifteen-year-old German, did the checks with Specialist Dimitri "The Tsar" Nikolaev. Barnard's check seemed short and perfunctory, but Chisnall knew it was probably more thorough than any of the others in the team.

That left Chisnall with Private First Class Blake Wilton, who was already beginning the same checks.

Barnard and Nikolaev, the two newest members of the team, didn't seem to get on particularly well, and Chisnall had buddied them together for that reason. Learning to rely on each other in life-or-death combat

situations was a good way to get over petty personal differences.

He had put Monster and Price together for much the same reason. Since Uluru there had been some kind of tension between them, which both of them denied when asked about it. But something had changed between them; Chisnall was sure of it.

A lot of things had changed since Uluru.

Monster himself had changed. He seemed to have developed a more spiritual side. He had always been a bit coarse and rather rough around the edges, but after Uluru he appeared to have started thinking more deeply about things. With Brogan gone, the team had needed another medic, and Monster had volunteered for the training. He seemed more interested in helping others than in hurting them, although Chisnall was still confident that he would pull his weight when it came to the fighting.

Brogan. Chisnall tried not to think about her. The one person he had absolutely thought he could trust

had turned out to be the one person he couldn't. That had changed something in him, and he didn't like it.

He put his hand on the ladder that led up to the hatch, still tightly sealed. His fingers rested on a weld where one of the rungs met one of the poles. He could feel the uneven metal of the weld even through the neoprene gloves of his wetsuit.

Wilton finished his checks and turned around so Chisnall could return the favour. A couple of tubes, a couple of knobs, all were as they should be. But he already knew that. He had checked it when they had suited up, and then again when they had entered the chamber.

He tapped Wilton on the shoulder to let him know he had finished.

Unlike a scuba set, the closed-circuit rebreathers used a bottle of liquid oxygen with softlime cartridges to remove carbon dioxide. With scuba gear, most of the oxygen in the tank was wasted, expelled into the ocean every time the diver exhaled. With the

rebreathers, very little was wasted. More importantly though, the closed-circuit system eliminated any tell-tale bubbles on the surface, and the full-face masks allowed for underwater conversations through built-in microphones.

“Equalise pressure.”

“Equalising valves open, ambient sea pressure reached.”

“Unlock the hatch. Angel team are clear to EV.”

“Open this tin can up for us, would you, Monster?”
Chisnall said.

Monster launched himself up off the deck and braced with one hand on a railing while he spun the wheel that opened the hatch.

It was pitch black in the tube but that changed with a crack of light as the hatch door opened. A half-moon made of metal turned into a full moon, letting in the light of a completely different world: the ocean outside the submarine. It was not bright, just the gentle

shimmering of light through the waves, ten or so metres above them.

Chisnall flicked off his night vision. There was no need for it outside. Not yet.

Monster was first out and waited by the hatch for the rest of the team to emerge, before spinning the wheel again to close it.

“Angel team are EV. Unlocking stowage lockers.”

The submarine was a long grey tube, smooth as oilskin, stretching away into the murk of the water behind them. There was a strange beauty to the symmetry of the vessel, broken only by the sail, the squat tower that jutted from the hull of the submarine, close to the nose.

Price was first to the sail, where the stowage lockers were located, and she opened the flat panels to allow the Angel team to access the equipment stored inside.

The first three compartments held barracuda DPVs, Diver Propulsion Vehicles. Price reached inside the spacious compartment and pulled the first of them out

by its tail. It looked like, and was designed to sound like, a large fish. The best efforts of the best scientists and engineers, trying to create something nature did effortlessly.

Price passed one to each member of the team before extracting her own.

An equipment pod followed, then a small torpedo-shaped object that she floated gently across to The Tsar. He attached it behind his barracuda. A towed sonar array, it was their eyes and ears in the dark night of the ocean.

“USS JP Morgan, this is Angel One. How copy?”

“Angel One, this is the USS JP Morgan. Clear copy.”

“Thanks for the ride, guys. We are Oscar Mike.”

“Very well. Goodbye, good luck, and godspeed.”

“Everybody ready?” Chisnall asked. He got quick nods from everyone, except The Tsar who thumped his chest twice with his fist and said, “Boo-yah, Big Dog, ready to rock’n’roll”.

“Keep taking the medication,” Barnard said.

“No fighting kids, or I’ll send you to your room,” Chisnall said.

He straddled his barracuda and leaned forwards, keeping his head below the front fairing to reduce water drag. He eased open the throttle and felt the large tailfin behind him begin to sweep back and forth. He twisted the throttle further and with a flick of its tail the narrow, rubberised hull slipped silently through the night water.

A week at sea on a Royal Navy destroyer, followed by two days on the submarine. Now it all came down to this. The final stage of their journey back behind enemy lines.

After Uluru, Chisnall had sworn never to return to Australia. He had also sworn he would never again command an Angel mission. Yet here he was.

It was their only chance, they had said when they came to him. If this mission fails, then the Americas will fall, and if the Americas fall, then the human race

will fall. They told him he was the only one with the experience, with the leadership skills, with ...

They said a lot of things, but Chisnall wondered if they thought he was the only one stupid enough to go back behind enemy lines on a mission that, any way he looked at it, seemed like a one-way ticket. A suicide mission.

That was a feeling he had not shared with the team.