

BRIAN FALKNER



# VENGEANCE

RECON TEAM ANGEL: BOOK FOUR

# **VENGEANCE**

**BRIAN FALKNER**

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For Sarah Foster  
Your vision, guidance, and support  
have meant the world to me

## **RECON TEAM ANGEL**

The lifting of the official veil of secrecy, and the subsequent publication of the diary of Lieutenant Trianne Price, has revealed astonishing revelations about the events at the end of the Bzadian War.

The role that the brave young men and women of Recon Team Angel played in those extraordinary times has never before been fully revealed.

This, finally, is their story.

## **DESERT PRAYER**

[Nazca Valley, Peru, 43 BC]

The snake scraped across the dry desert floor in front of Ching'wua, in search of water. It stopped, sensing Ching'wua's presence and raised its head in his direction. It was small, just a narrow necklace with bands of red, yellow and black. A coral snake: deadly but not aggressive. But if it was desperate enough, that could change.

Ching'wua watched the snake for a moment until it lowered its head and rasped away across the dry stones of the desert.

"Run snake," he called after it. "Run well, or I will catch you and drink your blood."

He rubbed the knuckles of his right hand, still bruised and scabbed from the fight the day before. One of the scabs had broken off, and was bleeding, but lightly.

“You, Ching’wua,” a voice came from behind him. “You stop to gossip with the desert?”

Ching’wua said nothing, and took a tight grip on his digging tool. He rammed the sharp end of it into the loosely packed red stones of the desert, loosening them, then reversed the tool, using the scoop end to lift the stones and reveal the whitish-grey substrate.

The High Born behind him walked up alongside as he spread the red stones across the desert to the side of the digging. Ching’wua glanced up, but only for a second. Any longer would bring the sapling whip down across his shoulders, which were already red and raw from the days of unrelenting sun.

The High Born – his name was Gochua – was a longhead, one of the last. His skull was long and narrow and his eyes were large. He was not born that way. Only the gods were born that way. At birth Gochua had had boards strapped to his skull, forcing the bones of his head to grow into the unnatural elongated shape. The High Born did it because it made

them look like gods. But they were not gods.

Real gods could fly through the sky like birds. They could heal the sick and change the weather.

The High Born could do none of that.

Looking like a god did not make you a god, Ching'wua thought bitterly, feeling Gochua's eyes on his back as he hacked again at the red stones.

The true gods had gone, many years before, and soon after they had left, so had the rains. Without the rains, the crops had failed, and that had brought starvation and death to his people. Even now the taste of the land snail was sour on his tongue. That had been their only food for days. He would rather have joined the gatherers, on their eight hour walk to the coast, to collect seafood and shellfish, than to be here, scratching out a message in the desert to gods who would never come.

The gods will return, the High Born insisted. They will answer our call. They will bring back the rains.

But they had not.



The High Born had drawn the first message high on a mountain, where it would be easy for the gods to see. Ching'wua had helped dig it: a circle inside a square, a design that the gods had shown them. But the gods had not seen it.

So the High Born had surrounded it with smaller circles, a message in a language that only the gods could understand. But still nothing. They had dug pits and heaped piles of precious food in them as offerings to the gods. Many people had starved to death to send this message, but still the gods had not listened.

The gods are too far away, the High Born said. Our message must be louder. So they had drawn huge designs on the desert floor, animals, birds, spiders. The lines of the pictures were ten shoulders wide, and stretching out of sight into the distance.

But even with these giant silent pleas, still the gods did not see.

Ching'wua had heard of other lands, not far away, high in the mountains, where fresh water still flowed,

and plants and wildlife were abundant. He, and many others, wanted to leave, to seek a new place where his people could live. But the High Born said no, the gods will bring back the rain.

The previous day Ching'wua had had to fight to defend his family's water gourd from a villager, crazed with thirst, who had tried to steal it. The man had fought like a cornered jaguar for the water, and much of it had spilt as Ching'wua had wrestled it off the man, and beat him into unconsciousness.

He did not blame the man. Thirst could do terrible things to a person.

"We must leave here," Arua said. He was working next to Ching'wua. He seemed tired, his digging tool barely ruffling the surface of the stones. Ching'wua glanced quickly at him. Arua looked unsteady on his feet. Just yesterday Aura had lost a child, a young girl, to the endless thirst.

"Speak quietly, or not at all," Ching'wua said. "Gochua is near."

“I will no longer listen to Gochua,” Arua said, “Or any of the other High Born. We will all die if we stay in this place.” His tongue sounded heavy and his words were blurred.

“The High Born say the gods will return,” Ching’wua said.

“The High Born lie,” Arua said.

Ching’wua was silent. He hoped Gochua had not heard that. Accusing the High Born of lying was punishable by death, and it would be a long, slow death.

“The High Born lie,” Arua said again, loudly.

“You, Arua,” Gochua said. “What do you say?”

“He said nothing,” Ching’wua said. “It is just the sun. He babbles.”

“I said you lie,” Arua said. “The gods will not return. We waste our energy and our lives.”

“Take him,” Gochua said, and two soldiers stepped down into the grey-white path, Ching’wua did not see where they came from.

“Ching’wua agrees with me!” Arua cried as they grasped his arms.

“I said nothing!” Ching’wua cried out, horrified, as Gochua’s gaze turned towards him.

Gochua said nothing but nodded towards Ching’wua and two more soldiers were suddenly upon him, wrenching at his arms, forcing him up onto the stony ground in front of Gochua, pressing him to his knees.

There was a burst of movement next to him and one of the guards holding Arua staggered backwards. Now somehow Arua was free, running for his life, slipping and skidding on the harsh stones.

The first spear missed, whistling through the air over Arua’s head as he slipped and fell, but now he was back on his feet and the second spear did not miss, impaling his leg and driving him down into the desert. The third spear entered his stomach and it was then that the writhing and the screaming began.

Gochua’s ceremonial dagger was at Ching’wua’s

throat. Ching'wua had been wrong. This would be a quick death, Gochua was only waiting for the attention of the other diggers before slicing the life from Ching'wua's body. A quick gush of red, on the red stones, and Ching'wua would join his ancestors, no more than a skull on rope carried by a priest.

"I said nothing," Ching'wua cried again, cursing his bad luck to be digging next to Arua.

"See the non-believer," Gochua called out to the waiting masses around them. Still Arua flailed and screamed in the distance.

Ching'wua's heart beat like that of a hummingbird, and his ears now were filled with the drumming of his own blood through his body.

"You said nothing, but you thought it," Gochua said, the blade of the knife slipping a little and cutting the skin at Ching'wua's throat.

"I said nothing!"

"Did you think it?" Gochua asked, his voice rose to a shout.

Ching'wua no longer saw the High Born. Instead his vision was filled with his wife, and their two young sons. If he died, they would die, without his protection. To save himself was to save them, but to save himself he would have to lie, because Gochua was right. He had been thinking those things. And a man could not lie before the gods, even if those gods were far, far away.

“I..” he stumbled over his words. “I..”

The drumming in his ears was louder now, a roaring sound, and it was not the sound of his own body. The knife eased from Ching'wua's throat as a strange shadow briefly blocked the sunlight . A cloud, in a cloudless sky? A bird, large enough to create a shade? No bird was that large.

There was a gasp from the crowd and the soldiers holding Ching'wua's arms loosened their grip. Ching'wua twisted free, and to his surprise the soldiers did not resist.

He turned his head to the sky, with the others, and

as he did the shadow again covered the sun.

The square and the circle, was his first thought. For in the sky was a large dark square, larger than anything he could imagine. Within the square was a circle of blue fire.

This rock, in the sky, impossibly large, grew even larger as it neared, and now winds began to stir the usually windless desert, brushing at Ching'wua's clothing, whispering into his hair, kicking at the stones around his feet.

Closer, now, lower, still the great thing from the sky descended on its glowing blue tail. It was low enough now that Ching'wua could see that the square was the base of a much larger shape, triangular on the sides, a great city in the shape of a pyramid floating above them, and slowly descending towards them.

The High Born chewed the ingakuwo weed and it gave them visions, but Ching'wua had been chewing no weeds and this was no vision. This was real.

"The gods have returned," Gochua said, dropping to

his knees. His voice, so strong and full of confidence before, was now an anxious whisper, the sound of dust shuffling across the desert floor. Even Arua's screaming had stopped.

Ching'wua prostrated himself on the ground, staring at the dirt, no longer even daring to peek at the floating city that sank slowly to the ground before him.

"The gods have returned," Ching'wua agreed.



# **BOOK ONE: NEW BZADIA**

War changes technology.

Technology changes war.

- *General Harry Whitehead*

## **TURNING TIDE**

[Mission Day 1, July 1st, 2033. 0355 hours local time]

[Tasman Sea, off the coast of Australia]

The sixth Angel sat below, in the cabin, out of sight.

How quickly things changed, Price thought. Less than five months ago it would have been unthinkable to have Angel Six on this mission. On any mission.

But five months ago this whole mission was unthinkable.

The world had taken a strange, surreal turn.

“Tacking now,” Angel Two, Specialist Janos (Monster) Panyoczki, called from the rear of the yacht.

Angel One, Lieutenant Trianne Price, ducked her head down, ready for the swing of the boom. It happened suddenly with a hiss of ropes through pulleys and the shush of the sail, the flapping of the sailcloth as it slackened, then the crack as the ropes snapped tight.

It was so loud that Price felt sure the enemy would hear it, although in reality she knew the sound would

not travel far. And in the deserted bay they were heading for there was nobody to hear it anyway.

They had been launched from a frigate, a stealth boat that had sneaked almost within sight of the Australian coast before using its crane to lift the yacht off the cradle at its stern.

Once they hit land they would have to find whatever transport they could. Only one thing mattered. The rendezvous time. By nine o'clock they had to be in Canberra. The beating heart of the Bzadian Empire.

The yacht straightened for a second or two as the boat tacked, then settled back onto a steep, uncomfortable angle. Price had been sitting on the low side of the boat, her back against the railings, but now she was on the high side and had to put an arm over the top rail to stop herself from slipping off the seat.

Angel Four, Specialist Retha Barnard and Angel Five, Specialist Hayden Wall were looking after the ropes (called 'sheets' on a sailboat according to

Monster). Angel Three, Specialist Dimitri (The Tsar) Nikolaev, was watching the scope. There was nothing for Price to do. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of the boat as it rose and surged against the waves, feeling useless, but not really minding.

This brought back memories, no, not exactly memories, more vague feelings of those early days of her life. Before it had all changed. Perhaps because of that this didn't feel like a mission. It felt like a holiday. That wouldn't last for long, she knew that, but for now there was a moment to be enjoyed.

The sails rustled for a moment in an indecisive breeze, then filled again with air. The bow of the yacht lifted and chill sea spray stung her hand. She didn't mind. After the hell of the Bering Strait mid-winter, she would never complain about the cold again.

The spray brought with it the smell of the night ocean: a deep, cleansing smell. Millions of years ago, scientists said, the distant ancestors of the human race had crawled out of the ocean. Maybe that was why

humans always felt drawn to it, she thought. Maybe there was some connection, deep within their souls, with the vast expanses of water that covered the planet.

The next puff of breeze brought with it a different smell, the smell of land. Price wasn't sure how she knew that, but she did. There was a subtle difference between the clean fresh smell of the night sea air and the musk of nearby land.

The ocean spray was in her nostrils, and in her mouth, a slight saltiness. The unadulterated taste of nature. But more than that: it was the taste of freedom.

That thought made her look at the door to the cabin. Angel Six was in there. Freedom meant different things to different people, Price thought, and Angel Six would never be free.

\* \* \*

[Mission Day -1, July 1st, 2033. 04:00 hours local time]

[Pacific Ocean, 100 km South of New Caledonia.]

The boat showed up on Zane's radar screen about five hundred kilometres due east of the mainland. It was a perfect night for the patrol. Earth's sky was virtually cloudless and the first vestiges of sun painted the horizon with a dull ochre glow. Not that that sun would reach New Bzadia for a few hours, but here, east of the mainland, high in the sky, the embryonic sunrise was the promise of a good day to come.

The cool night air was smooth, with not a trace of turbulence. It was like gliding on ice. To the north, far below and in the distance, a dull glow was the tiny settlement of Lord Howe island, as yet untouched by the war.

Out of the corners of his eyes, Zane was aware of the narrow angular shape of Nikoz's fighter to his left and Shelz'zah's to his right. All three planes were Razers, the smallest and fastest craft in the Bzadian air fleet.

They were on increased patrols. Longer hours, greater frequency.

The previous day, human stealth fighter/bombers had attacked Bzadian patrol boats up and down the coast, surely the precursor to some kind of attack on the mainland.

“You seeing this?” Nikoz’s voice sounded casual, almost amused by the blip that had appeared on the 3D scope.

“I’m seeing what you’re seeing,” Zane said. A boat, in the middle of the ocean, where no boat had a right to be.

“They’re either brave or stupid,” Nikoz said.

“Crazy, if they think they can avoid our patrols,” Zane said.

“There’s more than one.”

The voice came from Shelz’ah, the youngest on his patrol team, but her skills with the Razer were quite extraordinary. She had just returned from Chukchi where she had earned the Bzadian sash, the air force’s

third highest honour, during the abortive crossing of the Bering Strait.

Shelz'ah was right about the ships. A vague blur behind the first vessel, right on the edge of Zane's radar screen, solidified into a solid contact.

"Scumbugz are up to something," Nikoz said.

"We'd better check it out," Zane said. "Alter course to zero four seven."

The three Razers, as if a single craft, banked slightly as they turned onto the new heading. They were running about seven hundred miles per hour, just below the speed of sound, to conserve fuel.

Within a few minutes a third signal was tickling at the edge of the scope. "We got another..." Nikoz's voice broke off.

"What the hell is that?" Shelz'ah asked.

More blips were coming onto the scope now. A ring of ships with a large one at its centre.

"Nikoz, you're the expert on Scumbugz navies," Zane said. "What are we looking at?"



“Carrier strike group,” Nikoz said. “The one in the middle is an aircraft carrier.”

“That has to be where the stealth fighters came from yesterday,” Zane said.

“I thought all their ships were stuck in port,” Shelz’ah said.

“They are. They were,” Nikoz said.

“They haven’t risked them out on the open ocean,” Zane said. “Not since the early days of the war. They can’t afford to lose them.”

“They’re heading for New Zealand, if they stay on this course,” Shelz’ah said.

“Let’s get in a little closer and get a visual to confirm,” Zane said. “Accelerate to Mach one.”

\* \* \*

Sharp thunder, far distant, like the cracking of a whip, made Price turn her head, although there was nothing to be seen, not even stars. The expanse of the sail, black against the night sky, blocked everything in that direction.

There was nothing to see, yet she couldn't stop herself looking. The sound brought her back to reality. This was not a pleasure cruise. This was war, and they were about to sail into the middle of it.

"Ours?" she asked.

"Who knows," Barnard said. "One sonic boom sounds just like another. Could be scream-jets."

"Why they call scream-jets?" Monster asked. "Make noise like bang, not like scream." He imitated the sound of the planes, "Bang, bang, bang."

"Because Pukes are gonna scream when they hear 'em coming," The Tsar said.

"It's the sound the engine makes as the plane approaches ignition speed," Barnard said.

"I like The Tsar's answer better," Wall said.

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," Barnard said.

"So explain to us dumb asses how a plane can approach ignition speed before its engine starts," Wall said.

"I don't think you'd understand it if I did," Barnard

said.

“Don't let her intimidate you,” The Tsar said. “It can't be easy being smarter than everybody else in the world.”

“Do I intimidate you, Tsar?” Barnard asked.

“Not anymore,” The Tsar said. “I got you figured out.”

“Don't be so sure,” Barnard said.

“Just tell me about the scream-jets,” Wall said, smacking a hand into his forehead in mock exasperation.

“It's magic,” Barnard said. “You need two elves and a unicorn.”

Price laughed. “Tell him, Barnard. I'd like to know too.”

“Come on, I'll buy you an ice cream,” The Tsar said.

“Carrier jets,” Barnard said, with a roll of her eyes. “They lift the scream-jets high, real high, then launch them at supersonic speeds. Rocket boosters kick in and they dive until they reach Mach four, then the scramjet

engine fires and they go hypersonic.”

“How do they land?” The Tsar asked. “And don’t tell us fairies lower them gently back to earth.”

“I don’t know,” Barnard said.

“You don’t know what?” The Tsar asked.

“How they land,” Barnard said. “I’m not an aeronautical engineer.”

“Mark this day in your diaries, kids,” The Tsar said. “This was the day we found something that Barnard didn’t know the answer to.”

“Tsar, you’re so stupid you could fail a DNA test,” Barnard said.

“However they land, it’s still a helluva way to fly,” Wall said.

“Helluva way to fly,” Monster agreed.

“And the Pukes don’t have anything that fast?” Wall asked.

“Not even close,” Barnard said.

“Boo-yah,” Monster said.

“Unless they can come up with a way of countering

the Screamers, the air war is about to turn in our favour,” Price said. “And who controls the air, controls the battlefield.

There was silence from her team as the implications of that began to sink in. For the first time in over a decade there was a possibility of not just surviving, but of actually winning the war. It would be too late though for Emile. And Hunter. And Wilton.

Price turned her face away from the breeze. The cool sea air was making her eyes water.

The Tsar was manning the scope. He handed it to Wall and came to sit by Price. He put his arm around her shoulders.

She turned and stared at him until he took his arm away.

“You looked cold, Big Dog,” he said.

“I’m your commanding officer,” Price said. “You salute me, you don’t hug me.”

“Aye aye captain,” The Tsar said, saluting comically.

“Monster’s the captain,” Price said.

After a moment she reached over and put his arm back around her shoulders. She was cold. She moved slightly, nestling her back into him.

“What’s going on over there?” Monster called out from the back of the boat. “Hands off my girl.”

“I was cold,” Price called back, smiling. “And I didn’t know The Tsar was your girlfriend.”

The Tsar elbowed her in the ribs and Monster laughed.

“Anyway,” Price said. “At least I’m not lying naked in a bed with an Inupiat woman.”

Monster was silent and she felt The Tsar draw away a little.

“Bit harsh,” Wall said.

Price regretted saying it as soon as the words left her mouth. In the wilds of the Bering Strait, a native Inupiat woman named Corazon had saved Monster’s life by bringing up his body temperature when he had hypothermia. But her husband, Nukilik, had died helping the Angels, and thinking of her brought back

memories of him.

The moment stretched uncomfortably and she was almost glad of the distraction when the Bzadian patrol boat appeared. Almost.

\* \* \*

The group of ships was coming into visual range, and the high definition cameras in the nose of Zane's craft zoomed in. A grey blur on the surface of the ocean gradually resolved into the distinct outlines of warships, sleek and fast, cutting through the dark surface of the ocean, leaving long white gashes on the black backcloth behind them. There was something quite majestic about the way the bows rose into the air before crashing down into thundering furrows of spray.

"Can you identify them?" Zane asked.

"The two at the front are missile cruisers," Nikoz said. "The smaller ships to the sides of the carrier are destroyers."

"What about that larger ship next to the carrier?"

Shelz'ah asked.

“Supply ship,” Nikoz said. “Whatever they’re doing here, they’re planning on staying a while.”

Zane’s craft shuddered as it struck an invisible patch of turbulence. Wild air. An unexpected bump in what had been an otherwise clear and smooth flight. He barely noticed it. His focus was on the ships.

“That’s ... a concern,” Zane said.

“I agree,” Nikoz said and all the earlier amusement was gone from his voice.

“Why?” Shelz'ah asked. “Their defences are no match for our dragons.”

“Of course,” Zane said. “But they know that too, and they must know we’d be looking for them, after the attacks yesterday. So what are they doing here?”

“And why aren’t they turning and running for safety now they’ve been spotted?” Nikoz asked. “They would have seen us about the same time we saw them.”

As he spoke, a smaller blip detached itself from the



carrier. Zane's enemy aircraft warning indicator went off almost simultaneously.

"They're putting their birds in the air," he said.

"Time we were gone," Shelz'ah said.

"They have nothing that we can't outrun," Nikoz said.

"Let's try and figure out what they're up to," Zane said. "We'll disappear long before they get within missile range."

The blip was followed by another, and another, until there were six enemy aircraft rising in a wide circular pattern over the carrier group.

"Just trying to scare us off," Zane said. "They wouldn't dare come near us. And it's not the planes I'm worried about, it's the destroyers. If we get within range they'll start throwing SAMs at us."

"The aircraft aren't coming this way, they're just circling and climbing," Nikoz said.

These were not normal tactics, Zane thought. Whatever the humans were up to it they were doing

it in a way that they had not done before. He seriously considered turning back. That would probably be the sensible choice. His patrol group were lightly armed and they were heading into something that they didn't understand. Or was that the whole point of the human tactics? To confuse him? To force him to withdraw before he got too close?

The whole situation was strange, but also intriguing. More than that, it was his duty to find out what was going on. In any case there was no danger. The human planes were too far away and too slow to pose any kind of threat.

“Just a few more minutes,” he said, “Let's get some high-res shots of the ships, maybe that'll help Coastal Defence Command figure out what they are up to.”

The human planes continued to climb, higher than he had seen any go before, almost to the stratosphere. What was the point of that? They were burning fuel at a massive rate just to gain altitude.

“I think we should get out of here,” Shelz’ah said.

She seemed nervous for someone who was about to be decorated with the Bzadian Sash.

“Just a few more kilometres,” Zane said. “We...”

He stopped speaking. The six planes, in formation, had put their noses down and were now heading towards Zane and his patrol.

“Okay, let’s head back and call this in,” Zane said, still not particularly worried. “Maybe that was what the height was about, to help boost their speed. It won’t be enough though.”

The fast little Razer had a top speed of more than Mach 3. The fastest human fighters were less than half that fast.

He banked his plane around then punched up the power. As they regained supersonic speed after the turn he saw a vapour cone appear like a fuzzy circular disc around Nikoz’s and Shelz’ah’s tail fins, and he knew the same was around his own. There was no sound though. When you were travelling faster than

sound you could not hear the sonic boom you created. He kept increasing the power until his airspeed indicator hit Mach 2. Nikoz and Shelz'ah stayed in formation at his wingtips.

\* \* \*

“Picking up something on the scope,” Wall, said. “A boat. Heading in our direction.”

“Azoh!” Price swore. The name of the Bzadian spiritual leader had become a popular profanity.

“I thought ACOG was supposed to have sunk all the patrol boats up and down the coast,” The Tsar said.

“They were,” Barnard said.

“Check it out, Tsar,” Price said. She was immediately conscious of the lack of The Tsar’s warmth against her as he moved to take back the scope from Wall.

He nodded. “Wall’s right. There’s something there. To the North. Odd engine signature, but definitely a small ship.”

“Ok, go silent,” Price said.

Monster turned the bow into the wind and Price ducked instinctively as the boom swung towards her, although she knew it would not reach her. The sheets snapped taut as the boom reached the centreline of the yacht. Barnard and Wall lowered the sails. The boat went quiet, the dark canvas no longer straining against the ocean air, the bow no longer rising and falling. They drifted, a cork bobbing restlessly but noiselessly on the ocean.

“Still coming our way,” The Tsar said. “Maybe half a klick.”

The yacht was made of wood and fibreglass, virtually invisible to radar. The hull, the mast and the sails were all black. The yacht would be hard to see, even with night vision goggles, and it made almost no underwater sounds for sonar to detect. The chances of being spotted were small, but they could take no risks. Their lives depended on it. More importantly, the mission depended on it. Maybe so too did the life of the person they were going to meet.

Lieutenant Ryan Chisnall.

“How close is it going to get?” Price asked, her voice a whisper, although the Bzadian patrol boat was still distant.

“Going to pass in front of us ... I’m not sure how close,” The Tsar said. “It’s going very slowly, minimal engine noise, might be a sonar boat.”

“I need to pee,” Wall said.

“Dude, you’re been peeing like it’s the world champs and you got a chance at the gold,” The Tsar said.

“Must be the sound of all that water around us.” Wall said.

“Well hold it until that boat passes,” Price said.

It wasn’t the sound of the water. She knew that. It was nerves. She felt the same way. There was something about this stage of the mission, waiting for the danger, the action, that was more nerve wracking than when they were actually in the middle of battle.

The ship was getting close. Voices carried a long way over water at night. Lookouts on the patrol ship

might well miss a black mast bobbing in the water a hundred metres from the ship, but if they heard voices they would be sure to investigate. “What’s the range?” she asked.

“Three hundred metres,” The Tsar said.

There was complete silence except for the light wash of waves against the side of the boat. It seemed odd, yet fitting somehow, that on their third infiltration of New Bzadia they were not using high-powered technology, but one of the oldest modes of travel known to man. A floating hull, pushed by air currents across the sea. It was very low tech in a world of high tech.

Another series of supersonic booms came distantly from the north. A rippling series of explosions, high above and far away.

\* \* \*

“Something’s going on,” Shelz’ah said. “I’ve got double blips on the radar, as if the Scumbugz planes have just split in two.”

“It could be some kind of long-range missile,” Zane said, studying the radar, but the blips were too big for that and his threat detectors were silent.

The original radar contacts were turning, heading back towards the aircraft carrier, but the smaller ones were now streaking towards his patrol, and their speed was climbing.

“They’re gaining,” Shelz’ah said.

Zane checked his instruments. When the human planes had split into two, they had been over fifty miles away. Now they were closing in on forty.

“Must have been the dive,” he said. “Gave them a real speed boost. But they can’t sustain it, they’ll level off at our altitude and that will slow them down.”

He thought about that, then said, “Just to be sure, we’ll get the hell out of here. Stay with me.”

He punched his power up further, watching as his airspeed rose well above Mach Two.

That speed would use up their fuel cells quickly, but it was early in the patrol and they could afford to waste



a little.

“Still gaining,” Nikoz said after a few seconds. “And... What just happened?”

It was as if the little human planes had just found a new gear. In unison they had suddenly, and rapidly accelerated.

“Mach Four point five and climbing,” Shelz’ah sounded frightened.

Zane didn’t blame her. He was starting to get a little uneasy himself. This was not what was supposed to happen on patrol flights. There was a plan. If they encountered larger forces of human planes they turned, outran them and called for backup.

“Scope is not identifying the type either,” Nikoz said. “It’s not an F-35, or any of their known planes.”

“It’s something new,” Shelz’ah said in a hushed voice. “Hypersonic.”

Speeds approaching Mach Five were considered hypersonic, and Bzadian ramjet engines were no use at

that speed, no longer producing thrust.

“Go to maximum power,” Zane said. He keyed his command radio. “Coastal Defence Command, this is Patrol Echo Three Four.”

“Go ahead Patrol Echo Three Four.”

“We are under attack by unknown human aircraft. Something new. Travelling at hypersonic speeds. We are inbound at max speed but would appreciate a little help here.”

“Understood Echo Three Four, routing an air defence wing in your direction immediately.”

Zane breathed a small sigh of relief. Their backup was on its way. All they had to do was stay out of reach of the humans for a few more minutes and the six on three odds would be turned on their head. His airspeed passed Mach Three.

“Thirty kilometres and closing,” Shelz’ah said. Her voice was not steady. “Mach Five and still climbing.”

Mach Five and climbing! Zane checked his scope. These new human planes were catching up as if the

patrol was standing still.

“Twenty-five kilometres,” Shelz’ah said.

“We’re not going to outrun them,” Nikoz said.

“We’re going to have to turn and fight.”

He was right. They wouldn’t reach the safety of their air cover in time. Not by a long shot. Still, the Razer was more than a match for any human plane, even at six to three odds.

“We’re not going to turn,” Zane said. “On my mark, switch power to your reverse thrusters, we’ll slow right down, launch countermeasures and let them zip right by. See if they can outrun a rocket.”

“They’re coming right at us!” Nikoz yelled. “Ten kilometres. Eight!”

“Why aren’t they firing?” Shelz’ah asked. Zane didn’t have an answer; the enemy jets were well within missile range.

“We just need to keep them off us until the backup gets here,” Zane said. “Get ready to slam on the brakes. On my mark. In three, two, one ... now!”

He cut all power to his rear engines and simultaneously engaged his reverse thrusters. His craft shuddered as its speed dropped away, Mach Three, Mach Two...

He saw the human planes flash past overhead. They were small, with wings both above and below the fuselage. Biplanes. There were four tailfins like a rocket, shrouded in the mist of a supersonic vapour cone. Whatever they were, they were like no other human craft he had ever seen.

Even as he saw them the sky went crazy in front of him. The clear air suddenly exploded with the violent energy of multiple, overlapping sonic booms, close by. His plane was wrenched ferociously from side to side and up and down. His windscreen cracked in two places. His instruments went haywire.

As he fought for control of his craft he heard Shelz'ah yell, "Incoming! Six missiles! Breaking right!"

The human planes must have dropped the missiles just before they flashed overhead and in the wake of

their multiple sonic booms he had little control.

Shelz'ah's plane turned to the right, deploying countermeasures. Zane launched his own and forced his unresponsive craft to go with her. Nikoz had broken left, he saw on his radar screen.

He started to call instructions to Nikoz and Shelz'ah, but realized with a horrible certainty that there was nothing he could do and no time to do it in. The human planes had fired their missiles at point blank range.

All this he realized in little more than a second because that was how long he had to live.

He opened his mouth to say something, but it became a scream as Shelz'ah's Razer turned from a sleek predator of the sky into a jagged ball of flame. Half a second later so did Zane's.

\* \* \*

There were more explosions to the north, but these sounded different and followed flickers of light in the sky, the way that thunder follows lightning.

"Two hundred metres," The Tsar called softly.

Now they could clearly hear the surge of water against the ship's bows and the low rhythmic knocking of a large diesel engine.

"Absolute silence," Price said. Even as she uttered the words a gust of wind caught the rigging and a pulley knocked against the mast, a sudden loud clanging. Wall moved quickly to tighten a sheet.

Price said nothing. She didn't need to. Everyone on board understood the need for silence. She dialled her night vision lenses to maximum but could only make out a vague black shape advancing slowly towards them.

They drifted. Less than a hundred metres away, the larger, armed craft, advanced steadily through the water in front of them. If it was anything like the last patrol boat they had encountered, it would have a crew of at least twenty, heavy machine guns, high intensity radar and a towed sonar array.

The yacht had no armour and no weapons.

"It's going to hit us," Wall said in a whisper. "Raise

the sail, we gotta move.”

“No it’s not,” The Tsar said. “It’ll pass in front.”

“How can they not have seen us?” Barnard asked.

Price stared at the hull of the oncoming ship, looming larger and larger, green in her NV. It certainly looked as though it was on a collision course, it seemed to be coming directly at them.

“Absolute quiet,” she said. “We might get really lucky.”

“And if not?” Wall asked. “You may have an invisibility cloak, but I forgot to bring mine.”

“Then we’re just a bunch of Pukes learning how to sail who got blown out to sea,” Price said.

Price held her breath as the ship moved within shooting distance. There was no sign of movement on the ship, no shouts, no alarms or sirens. Could it really be going to pass them by, so closely, and somehow not detect them?

All of them were completely motionless, crouched down in the yacht, as if that would somehow help.

There were minor sounds of movement from the cabin. Stay put, Price mentally willed Angel Six. Now would be a bad time to emerge. The Tsar must have been thinking the same thing as he moved silently to the small staircase, blocking the cabin door with his body.

The ship seemed so close that she could almost reach out and touch it. It was certainly within spitting distance, a large black hull, unlit, blotting out the stars, the water splitting into two dense swells as the vee of the bow passed through them.

“Holy Azoh!” Barnard said loudly. Too loudly.

Price shushed her with a hiss.

“Nobody’s going to hear me,” Barnard said. “Look up.”

Price lifted her gaze from the waterline of the ship to the top deck. Barnard was right. There was no need for quiet.

The superstructure of the ship was gone. What was left of it was a twisted, smoking skeleton. The hull was



scorched but intact. Somehow the engine was still turning over, keeping the ship moving just enough to maintain steerage. It was a ghost ship, haunting the eastern coast of Australia until it ran out of fuel or ran aground. The way it was heading that would be on Antarctica, Price thought.

As the ship moved upwind of them the clean ocean breeze was engulfed by an acrid stench of burning oil and metal, and something else that Price didn't want to think about.

“Azoh,” she said.

“Poor bastards,” Wall said.

“Really?” The Tsar asked. “You sound a bit sentimental about a bunch of stinking aliens. Is that because you used to be one?”

Wall shook his head and did not respond.

“I'm with Wall,” Price said pinching her nostrils together to block the smell of charred flesh. “I wouldn't wish that on anyone.”

“It's just good to see them coming off worst for a

change,” The Tsar said.

“Tide beginning to turn,” Monster said.

“Damn right,” Price said. “They’ve had it all their way for far too long. Now the shoe’s on the other foot.”

“No. I mean tide beginning to turn,” Monster said. “Need to raise up sail. We must getting into bay before low tide.”

The wind turned with the tide, in their favour, flicking around behind them, filling the sails and skimming them across the wave tops like a pebble across a river. The smouldering hulk of the patrol ship slipped quickly away behind them, plodding its mindless way towards its rendezvous with Antarctica, if it made it that far.

Within minutes, it seemed, the headlands of the bay slipped past and they entered the sheltered waters within, cocooned from the onshore winds by encircling rocky arms.

The bay was wide at the entrance but narrowed

rapidly. They docked at a small jetty, the only one still standing, although the remains of many more were scattered along the shoreline.

Barnard looked at Price. She raised an eyebrow. “Do you want me to ...?”

“No, I’ll do it,” Price said. The boat rocked slightly as she took the narrow, steep stairs that led down to the cabin and she had to hold the handrail for support.

She stopped a moment and took a deep breath before rapping twice on the closed door.

“Rise and shine, Brogan,” she said. “It’s time to go.”