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Chapter I

Where Angels Fear

[Mission Day I. 2335 hours local time]

[F-35 Lightning II Stealth Bomber, somewhere over the centre of Australia]

“Angel Chariot, this is Heaven. How copy?”

“Heaven, this is Angel Chariot, clear copy, over.”

“Angel Chariot, we have zero five bogies now airborne in your proximity. Repeat, zero five bogies. Expect enemy craft approaching from your six. Anticipate interception in one seven mikes, confirm.”

“Angel Chariot confirming zero five bogies, interception in one seven mikes.”

“Confirmation acknowledged, Angel Chariot. Proceed as planned. Good luck. Out.”

The voices in his ear fell silent and Chisnall glanced around at the vague shadows that were the other five members of his team, crouched together in an impossibly small space in the bomb bay of the aircraft. A space that was never designed for human beings.

The other members of the team couldn't hear the voices of the pilot (snug and safe in his cockpit somewhere above them) and their mission controller (thousands of kilometres away at the Operational Command Centre). Only Chisnall had a link to that channel. So the others did not know that five enemy jets were heading their way, and the first would be right on their tail in less than seventeen minutes.

He decided not to tell them.

A ripple of fear welled up from his groin, through his gut, stretching dark fingers out around his chest. His heart began to race as the fingers took hold around his neck, choking him. A tingling sensation spread from his fingertips to his shoulders.

He took a deep breath and expelled it slowly, humming to himself as he did so. Panic, not the circumstances, was the killer. That's what his combat instructor had rammed home again and again. Fear is your friend, keeping you sharp. But panic is the unclean spirit, twisting your soul, consuming logic, training, and finally you.

So Chisnall hummed to himself and, in doing so, banished the panic to the far corners of his mind.

"Okay, final sys-checks," he said in a steady voice.

The noise inside the fuselage of the plane would have deafened a corpse. The bomb bay had been heated and pressurised for this mission, but not soundproofed. With the continuous roar from the other side of the bomb bay doors, it was like being in front of the speakers at a thrash metal concert. If they hadn't all been wearing com units, talk would have been impossible.

One by one, each of the team members' systems check came up on his HMDS. Five of the team had sys-OK, including himself.

"Angel Three, you're showing a helmet breach. What's going on, Hunter?" Chisnall could barely see Angel Three (Specialist Stephen "Hunter" Huntington), although he was no more than a metre away from him. The darkness in the fuselage was almost absolute. The only light came from the ready lights on the six half-pipes on the floor beneath their feet.

"Just scratchin' my nose, Angel One," Hunter replied, and his sys-check lit up before he finished speaking.

"Picking your nose, you mean," Angel Six (Private First Class Trianne Price) said.

"This is Angel Five, I have visual confirmation, over," Angel Five (Private First Class Blake Wilton) said. "He was definitely picking."

"Mate," Angel Two (Sergeant Holly Brogan) said, "if Hunter could pick his nose, would he have picked that one?"

Hunter's voice came immediately in Chisnall's ear. "Angel One, I

wish to report Sergeant Brogan for breach of regulations, subsection C, paragraph 6 – intentionally dischargin’ a joke that’s older than my grandmother, without regard for the safety of others.”

“Is not Price your grandmother?” Angel Four (Specialist Janos “Monster” Panyoczki) asked.

“Bite me,” Price said and there was a muffled thump on the com.

Chisnall grinned to himself. Nearly eighteen, “Phantom” Price was the oldest member of the team.

The pilot’s voice cut across the banter. “*Angel One, this is Angel Chariot, how copy?*”

“Angel Chariot, this is Angel One, clear copy,” Chisnall replied immediately.

“*Angel One, I have six greens showing on my board. Please confirm you are ready to Echo Victor.*”

“Angel One confirming six sys-OKs. All angels ready to fly, over.”

“*Echo Victor in approximately one four mikes, confirm?*”

“Confirm Echo Victor in one four mikes.” Chisnall checked his pulse again. Fourteen minutes until the EV, which was just a short way of saying they were going to be ejected from a fast moving jet at 32,000 feet.

“That’s totally crappy, dude,” Wilton said. “Why don’t we just go now?”

“You know why,” Chisnall said. “We have to wait until the pilot fires off chaff. As soon as one of the Pukes gets missile lock on us, we are out of here.”

“So hit the chaff and let’s go,” Wilton said.

“Wilton, yaplonker,” Hunter said. “If Angel Chariot releases chaff before one of the Pukes gets missile lock, then those Pukes start saying to themselves, what’d he do that for? And the last thing we need is a bunch of suspicious Pukes on our six.”

“Yeah, and if the Puke gets a shot off before we EV, then we’re CFC!” Wilton said.

“CFC? What is this CFC?” Monster asked. “Not in SMTPA manual.”

“Crispy Fried Chicken,” Holly Brogan informed him.

Chisnall shook his head. “If we don’t jump in the chaff, then we might as well take out a front page on Google, telling the Pukes that we’re on our way.”

“I know it, LT,” Wilton said. “But that don’t make it any easier to sit up here with our butts hanging out waiting for the first Puke fast mover to kick us where it hurts.”

“You think?” Price said.

Silence spread like a thick cloud through the confined space. This was it. The real thing. A combat drop over enemy territory. A first for all of them. Chisnall couldn’t see their faces, but he could sense their tension. The timing had to be perfect. A second wrong either way and the mission was compromised, or they were dead. Which pretty much amounted to the same thing.

The Operational Command Centre, thousands of kilometres away but with all-seeing satellite eyes, was back on the com to the pilot of their aircraft.

“Angel Chariot, this is Heaven, how copy?”

“Clear copy, Heaven.”

“Interceptors passing through two zero kilo feet. Anticipate interception in zero eight mikes. Looks like type ones, over.”

Intelligence had identified four different types of enemy fast movers since the start of the war. type ones were smaller, lightly armed, but faster. The first of them was already over 20,000 feet, on its way to blow Angel Chariot out of the sky in less than eight minutes.

Chisnall stretched his legs as much as he could in the confined space. His knees were jammed up against the hard plastic shell of his half-pipe. It had been triple-checked before take-off and the green ready light in the centre of the case glowed dimly.

A minute passed, and another. Chisnall ticked them off on his HMDS. Three minutes, four minutes, five.

The pilot spoke again in his ear. *“Angel One, this is Angel Chariot.”*

“Angel One receiving,” Chisnall replied.

“Assume launch position. Confirm.”

Chisnall looked at the vague shapes around him. “Okay, team, grab your bags, stick your heads between your legs, and get ready to kiss your butts goodbye.”

There was a proper protocol for telling them they were about to launch, and that was not it. But protocol or not, they all reached down and grasped the handles on their half-pipes, rolling onto them, lying

longways to reduce the impact of the slipstream once they dropped.

“Angel Chariot, this is Angel One. Launch position confirmed, over.”

“Stand by for pressurisation.”

“Standing by.”

There was a hiss and his flight suit compacted slightly as the air-pressure in the bay increased.

“I’m not getting paid enough for this,” Wilton said.

“You’re getting paid?” Brogan asked. “I’m doing this for fun.”

“Stand by. Stand by.”

Chisnall gripped the handles on his half-pipe tightly. His pulse was racing, but there was no trace of panic. Not now. They had done this dozens of times in training, and hundreds of times in the simulator. Reflexes took over. His mind was on autopilot, automatically preparing for the sudden drop and the shocking blast of air.

Seconds only now.

“Angel Chariot, this is Heaven. We are seeing zero two bogies forming up in attack position on your six, how copy?”

“Clear copy. I see them, Heaven. Stand by, Angel team.”

More seconds passed.

“What are they doing?” Price’s words came through gritted teeth.

“Cut the chatter and prepare to Echo Victor,” Chisnall said.

They all needed maximum concentration now.

“Missile lock! Missile lock! Deploying chaff. Echo Victor. Echo Victor. Echo Victor.”

One moment there was a solid floor beneath them, and the next moment, nothing.

The bomb bay doors slid smoothly, instantly away and the pressure inside blasted them from the aircraft in a kick of rushing air.

They were out, the F-35 jiggling up and to the right. Chisnall clung to the half-pipe, trying to meld himself with the device, as they were trained to do. Like six cowboys on bucking broncos, they rode the angular, bomb-like shapes out into the night sky.

The slipstream was a wild animal tearing at his helmet and the heavy leather of his flight gloves, trying to rip him from his half-pipe. The cold was immediate and shocking, like needles of ice all over his body, despite the thermal flight suit. His breath fogged his faceplate for a second before

the suit's internal mechanisms took care of it.

Chaff cylinders were exploding around them, the twirling spirals of metal turning the sky to silver, and they were falling through it.

Six highly trained Special Forces soldiers.

One air-cushioned equipment canister.

Zero parachutes.

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[2350 hours]

[Early Warning Radar Centre, Uluru Military Base, New Bzadia]

The glow of the radar screen added its light to those of the others around the circumference of the room, casting a green haze over everything and everyone.

Inzusu's eyes were fixed on one dot on the screen. Just a few glowing pixels, but at that moment every cell in his body was focused on them. A human jet, invading Bzadian airspace. The first he had seen in almost two years of radar duty.

It was beyond reason that the scumbugz, the humans, on the verge of being wiped from the face of the planet, would dare to send an aircraft here, to the heart of New Bzadia.

"You're sure there's just one intruder." Czali, his supervisor, leaned over his shoulder.

Inzusu rotated the three-dimensional display around to the horizontal.

"There's just a single return, and if there were two of them there would have to be some horizontal or vertical separation. I'm sure it's a single plane."

"Makes no sense," Czali murmured. "It's not an attack, and they don't need recon; they have satellites to do that."

Every move they made on this god-forsaken planet was closely watched by the satellite eyes of the natives.

"Whoa!" Inzusu said as a bright flare appeared where the dot had been.

"It's just chaff," Czali said. "Where are our interceptors?"

Inzusu pointed towards a group of red dots on the screen, each

marked with a number and call sign. "We already have missile-lock. The chaff won't help them."

Czali made a murmuring sound of agreement.

"What's this?" Inzusu asked, pointing at a faint flicker on the screen.

Czali leaned forwards. Inzusu rotated the display up and down, trying different angles, zooming in.

Whatever it was, it was dropping from the chaff cloud, just the faintest of ghostly echoes.

"Empty chaff canister?" she suggested.

"There's another one," Inzusu said. "Parachutes? Have the scumbugz pilots bailed out?"

Czali shook her head. "Parachutes give a much bigger return, and these are falling, not floating. Just debris, I think, but keep an eye on them."

"We're firing," Inzusu said, forgetting the ghosts. He watched with excitement two tiny dots detach from one of the interceptors and streak towards the intruder.

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The air whipped and wrenched at Chisnall, a loose strap on a utility pocket flapping at high speed, a buzz-saw sound that he felt through the fabric of the suit. That was bad. He would have bawled out any one of his team for making such a mistake.

Three seconds into the fall and Chisnall thrust the half-pipe away from him and starfished, the webbing between his arms and legs grabbing at the air and slowing his fall. Not much, but enough. His half-pipe, sleek and angular, fell like a stone, disappearing below him.

He was through the chaff cloud now, and encased in a dark night blanket. Far below him, Australia, the great desert, flowed forever in the creeping night. Only a faint thumbprint of city light far to the south, interrupted the vast emptiness. Somewhere near him were the five phantoms that were the members of his team, illusory black shapes in a black sky over a black land.

"Missile launch. Missile launch. Deploying flares, breaking high and right."
The pilot sounded impossibly calm in the sky above their heads.

Chisnall did not respond. There was nothing to say, and they were on full radio silence until they landed. If the Pukes detected them, the mission would be over before it had begun.

The enemy radar systems were highly sophisticated, much more advanced than their own. But the small half-pipe dropping away somewhere below him was the ultimate in stealth technology: all flat surfaces, plasma screening, and a built-in radar detection system that would activate small fins on the casing and turn the half-pipe away from any radar sources. At night, it was all but invisible.

Likewise, the stealth flight suit he was wearing would automatically orientate itself to present the lowest possible radar profile to the enemy. The battle above their heads was intensifying. The type ones, the enemy craft, were faster and more agile than even the best of human aircraft, and Angel Chariot had no way to evade them.

But hiding in the sky was a surprise for the Pukes.

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“Multiple signals!” Inzusu screamed. A swarm of dots had suddenly appeared on his screen. He stabbed at the coms button. “Multiple signals, right behind you. Immediate evasive manoeuvres!”

The pilots of the interceptors reacted immediately, breaking formation and streaking into different parts of the sky.

“Where the hell did they come from?” Czali asked behind him, an accusatory tone in her voice.

“Out of nowhere.”

“They’re not aircraft; they’re missiles, hunter-seekers,” Czali said, examining the screen.

“Hunter-seekers? The scumbugz don’t have hunter-seekers!”

“They do now. Must have got hold of one of ours and reverse-engineered it.”

“Damn!” Inzusu hit the coms button again. “Get out of there, now! Multiple hunter-seeker missiles right behind you. Repeat, multiple hunter-seekers right on your tails.”

Already the tiny hunter-seekers were accelerating to attack speed and targeting the closest interceptor. He could imagine the shock on

the pilots' faces as they realised the danger behind them, the sudden breaking off of the attack on the scumbugz as the pilots fought for their own lives. Their planes had sophisticated anti-missile systems but the enemy missiles were hunting in packs.

Czali swore as two of the red dots blinked, then disappeared from the screen.

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Two more flashes lit the sky above Chisnall, fading into the distance as he fell.

"Heaven, this is Angel Chariot. I have two confirmed hunter-seeker kills. Both type ones. How copy?"

"Clear copy, Angel Chariot. Confirming two kills, over."

The pilot continued dispassionately. *"I have three-way missile lock. I am breaking low and left, heading for home."* Then his voice changed. *"Missile launch! Missile launch! I have multiple inbound missiles. Confirming zero six missiles, over."*

Chisnall's heart sank. The other enemy craft had closed within range. There were six air-to-air missiles swarming towards Angel Chariot. Nobody could evade that.

The second wave of hunter-seekers would be needling towards their targets now, but it was too late.

Three explosions and three blasts of light. Three more Pukes that were not going to be returning to base tonight. That was all of the interceptors but it was not going to save Angel Chariot.

The voice of the pilot was back in his ear in quick unemotional sentences. *"Countermeasures deployed. Missiles are closing. Going for the moon, over."*

The pilot had tipped his jet back and was now rocketing skywards, vertically, like a rocket lifting off, hoping to leave the missiles below him. But it was not going to work. It was never going to work.

"Missiles still closing. Missiles—"

There was another boom, a long way distant.

Chisnall cursed under his breath.

Angel Chariot, the plane they had just jumped from, was now

fragments of metal and exploding fuel tanks, a fiery meteor falling back towards the Earth.

But it had played its part. It had given the enemy radar something to focus on, a distraction, as the six angels fell towards the desert floor below.

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There was silence as the last of the red dots blinked and faded from the screen. Inzusu gritted his teeth. They were not just dots. They were comrades. Bzadians. Killed by the scumbugz that infested this planet.

“We need to wipe this planet clean,” he said.

“Disinfect it,” Czali agreed grimly.

Inzusu turned his attention back to the ghostly echoes fading in and out on his radar screen. Still no sign of parachutes. The echoes were falling like stones. Just to be sure, he kept watching until the faint signals crashed to the hard rock and compacted sand of the New Bzadian desert.

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Chisnall kept his arms and legs spread wide. Already the others would be accelerating down away from him. It was standard operating procedure to stagger the landings, for safety reasons. He would be the last of his team to land. So if things went badly wrong, he would be the last of his team to die, although he would only outlive them by a few seconds.

He checked his timing, then tucked his arms and legs into his body. He felt the acceleration as his body dropped faster and faster. Already he was falling as fast as a human being could fall: terminal velocity.

“Angel Six down, all Oscar Kilo.” It was Price’s voice. She sounded winded, but that was normal for this type of jump. She was the first to land.

“Angel Five down. Oscar Kilo, Oscar Kilo.”

Wilton was also down and okay.

Chisnall’s eyes were glued to his HMDS, waiting for the signal from his own half-pipe. There it was: a yellow light and a *pip, pip* alert in his ear.

His half-pipe was due to impact, in three, two, one ...

The pipping stopped. There was a moment's silence, followed by a screech inside his helmet and a red flashing light.

The half-pipe had failed to deploy!

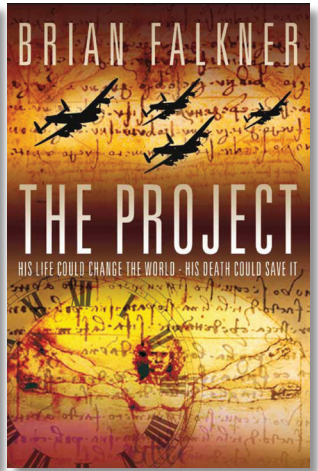
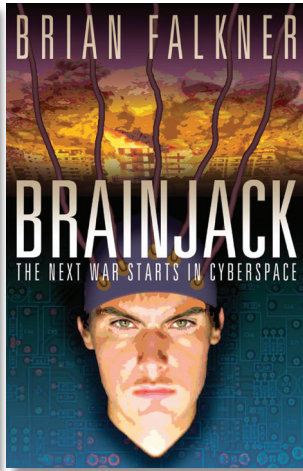
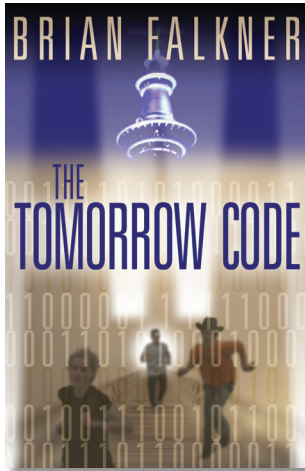
He punched at the manual override. Another screech, and the red light was still blasting at him.

His landing gear had failed.

Those panicky hands were back around his heart and nothing was going to persuade them to loosen their grip. Lieutenant Ryan Chisnall of the Allied Combined Operations Group, Reconnaissance Battalion, was now falling towards the barren Australian desert at terminal velocity.

Very terminal.

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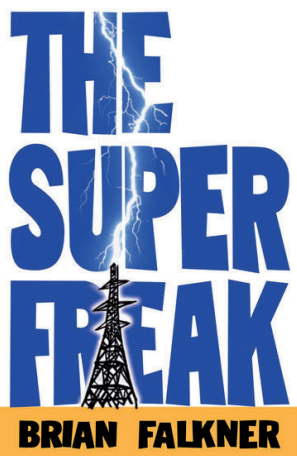
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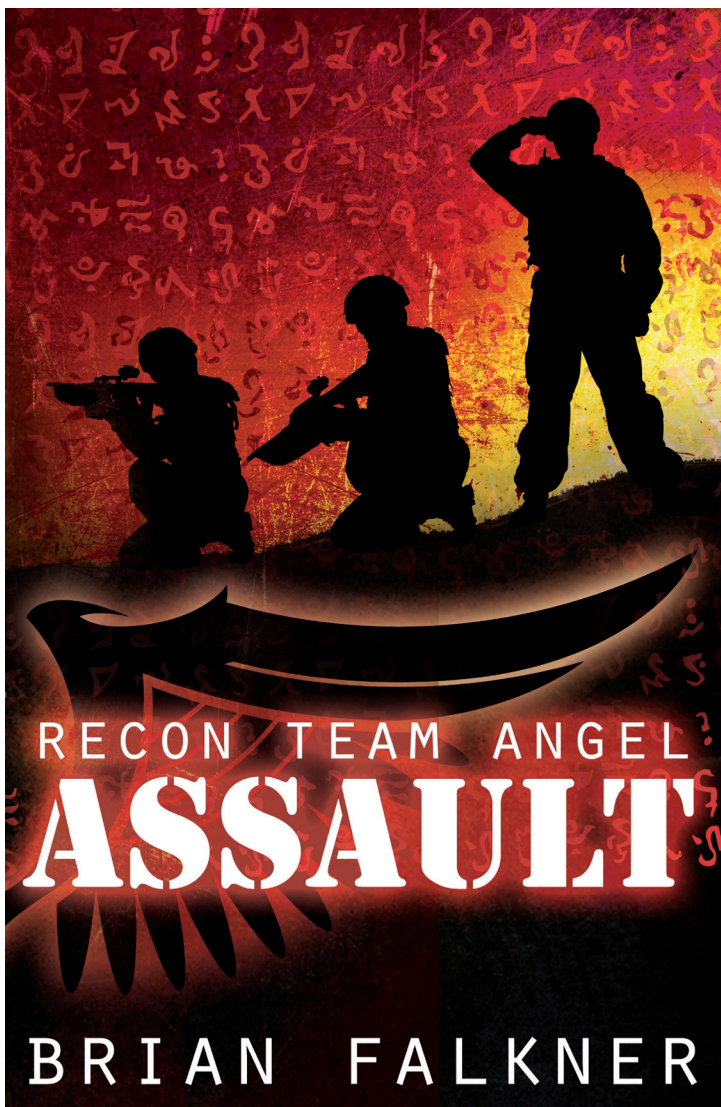
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