

DOWN TO EARTH

Splashdown.

Alex Rider would never forget the moment of impact, the first shock as the parachute opened and the second – more jolting still – as the module that had carried him back from outer space crashed into the sea. Was it his imagination or was there steam rising up all around him? Maybe it was sea spray. It didn't matter. He was back. That was all he cared about. He had made it. He was still alive.

He was lying on his back, crammed into the tiny capsule with his knees tucked into his chest. Half closing his eyes, Alex experienced a moment of extraordinary stillness. He was motionless. His fists were clenched. He wasn't breathing. Already he found it impossible to believe that the events that had led to his journey into space had really taken place. He tried to imagine himself hurtling around the earth at seventeen and a half thousand miles an hour. It couldn't have happened. It had surely all been part of some incredible dream.

Slowly he forced himself to unwind. He lifted an arm; it rose normally. He could feel the muscle working. Just minutes before, he had been in zero gravity. But as he rested, trying to collect his thoughts, he realized that once again his body belonged to him.

Alex wasn't sure how long he was on his own, floating in the sea somewhere ... it could have been anywhere in the world. But when things happened, they happened very quickly. First, there was the hammering of helicopter blades. Then the whoop of a siren. He could see very little out of the window – just the rise and fall of the ocean – but suddenly there was a palm slamming against the glass. A scuba-diver. A few seconds later, the capsule was opened from outside. Fresh air came rushing in, and to Alex it smelled delicious. At the same time, a figure loomed over him, his body wrapped in neoprene, his eyes behind a mask.

“Are you OK?”

Alex could hardly make out the words, there was so much noise outside. Did the diver have an American accent?

“I'm fine,” he managed to shout back. But it wasn't true. He was beginning to feel sick, and there was a shooting pain behind his eyes.

“Don't worry! We'll soon have you out of there...”

It took them a while. Alex had only been in space a short time but he'd never had any physical training for it, and now his muscles were turning

against him, reluctant to start pulling their own weight. He had to be manhandled out of the capsule, into the blinding sun of a Pacific morning. Everything was chaotic. There was a helicopter overhead, the blades beating at the ocean and forming patterns that rippled and vibrated. Alex turned his head and saw – impossibly – an aircraft carrier as big as a mountain looming out of the water less than a quarter of a mile away. It was flying the Stars and Stripes. So he had been right about the diver. He must have landed somewhere off the coast of America.

There were two more divers in the water, bobbing up and down next to the capsule, and Alex could see a fourth man leaning out of the helicopter directly above him. He knew what was going to happen and he didn't resist. First a loop of cable was passed around his chest and connected. He felt it tighten under his arms, and then he was rising into the air, still in his Ark Angel uniform, dangling like a blue-suited puppet as he was winched up.

And already they knew. He had glimpsed it in the eyes of the diver who had spoken to him. The disbelief. These men – the helicopter, the aircraft carrier – had been rushed out to rendezvous with a module that had just re-entered the earth's atmosphere. And inside, they had found a boy. A fourteen-year-old had just plummeted a hundred miles from outer space. These men would be sworn

to secrecy, of course. MI6 would see to that. They would never talk about what had happened. But nor would they forget it.

There was a medical officer waiting for him on board the *USS Kitty Hawk*, the ship that had been diverted to pick him up. His name was Josh Cook and he was forty years old, black with wire frame glasses and a pleasant, softly spoken manner. He helped Alex out of his tracksuit and stayed with him when Alex finally did throw up. It turned out that he'd dealt with astronauts before.

"They're all sick when they come down," he explained. "It goes with the territory. Or maybe I should say terra firma. You've certainly come down to earth. You'll be fine by tomorrow morning."

"Where am I?" Alex asked.

"You're about a hundred miles off the east coast of Australia. We were on a training exercise when we got a red alert that you were on your way down."

"So what happens now?"

"Now you have a shower and get some sleep. You're in luck. We've got a mattress made out of memory foam. It was actually developed by NASA. It'll give your muscles a chance to get used to being back in full gravity."

Alex had been given a private cabin in the medical department of the *Kitty Hawk* – in fact a fully equipped "hospital at sea" with sixty-five beds, an operating theatre, a pharmacy and everything else

that five and a half thousand sailors might need. The cabin wasn't huge, but he suspected that nobody else on the *Kitty Hawk* would have this much space. Cook went over to the corner and pulled back a plastic curtain to reveal a shower cubicle.

"You may find it difficult to walk," he explained. "You're going to be unsteady on your feet for at least twenty-four hours. If you like, I can wait until you've showered."

"I'll be OK," Alex said.

"All right." Cook smiled and opened the main door. But before he left, he looked back at Alex. "You know – every man and woman on this ship is talking about you," he said. "There are a whole pile of questions I'd like to ask you, but I'm under strict orders from the captain to keep my mouth shut. Even so, I want you to know that I've been at sea for a long, long time and I've never encountered anything like this. A kid in outer space!" He nodded. "I hope you have a good rest. There's a call button beside the bed if you need anything."

It took Alex ten minutes to get into the shower. He had completely lost his sense of balance, and the roll of the ship didn't help. He turned the temperature up as high as he could bear and stood under the steaming water, enjoying the rush of it over his shoulders and through his hair. Then he dried himself and got into bed. The memory foam was only a few centimetres thick but it seemed to mould itself to the shape of his body exactly.

He fell almost instantly into a deep but troubled sleep.

He didn't dream about the Ark Angel space station or his knife fight with Kaspar, the crazed eco-terrorist who had been determined to kill him even though it was clear that all was lost. Nor did he dream about Nikolei Drevin, the billionaire who had been behind it all.

But it did seem to him that, in the middle of his sleep, he heard the whisper of voices which he didn't recognize but which, somehow, he still knew. Old friends. Or old enemies. It didn't matter which, because he couldn't make out what they were saying; and anyway, a moment later they were swept away down the dark river of his sleep.

Perhaps it was a premonition.

Because three weeks before, seven men had met in a room in London to discuss an operation that would make them millions of pounds and would change the shape of the world. And although Alex had never met any of them, he certainly knew who they were.

Scorpia were back.