

Chapter 3

Depths Of Despair

Surface Agent X2-Zero sat brooding in his gloomy old house on the Isle of Lemoy.

Doctor Venus had eluded him. If only things had gone according to plan, he would by now have wrung every last detail of the Terraineans experiments from the wretched girl, and then he would have delivered his captive to Titan - and been richly rewarded... Still, at least he had the pills. Titan would surely be pleased with him - or so he hoped...

The surface agent's hopes faded rapidly as he reported to Titan over the video link. As he detailed his actions, the undersea ruler's displeasure was becoming increasingly obvious.

"And that," Titan demanded, "is all you have to report?"

"But mighty Titan," X2-Zero grovelled, "I have samples of their new experimental drugs, and the Terraineans will take months to rebuild their equipment."

Titan stared down balefully from the video screen. X2-Zero could see that his master was not about to heap praise upon him.

"Imbecile!" the undersea ruler shouted. Then lowering his voice, Titan spoke slowly and carefully, as if talking to someone of limited intelligence, "X2-Zero, did it not occur to you to kidnap the Terrainean female, Doctor Venus, and bring her here to Titanica?"

X2-Zero decided to remain silent. He dared not admit he'd failed the attempt.

Titan leaned back on his coral throne, as he continued, “The Terrainean female will be brought here to Titanica and forced to tell us all about these drugs that you have acquired - and she will no longer be able to use them against us.”

“Yes Mighty Titan,” the surface agent hastily agreed. “You are most wise. I will see to it at once!”

“No!” Titan raised a hand, “You will proceed to Titanica at once - with the drugs. I cannot risk their loss. I will despatch a Mechanical Fish to Space City to capture Doctor Venus.”

“But... Mighty Titan, Doctor Venus is still at Marineville.”

“Do as I say,” commanded Titan. “There is but one other machine the Terraineans can employ for their purpose - and Doctor Venus will no doubt hurry to acquire it.”

“And the machine is at Space City?”

“So more capable surface agents than you have informed me, X2-Zero. Now, bring those drugs to me - at once!”

Commander Shore watched from the Control Tower windows as a sleek blue WASP passenger jet soared into the sky — bound for Space City. “Okay Atlanta, re-schedule Stingray’s patrol to start tomorrow.”

Atlanta looked up from her console, “But father, I thought Troy would have some free time, now that Doctor Venus has gone.”

“Free time?” Commander Shore shook his head, “If I know Captain Tempest, he’ll want to be back at the controls of Stingray.”

“I... I hoped I could... That is I hoped that Troy and I could spend some time together. Stingray’s patrol isn’t scheduled until next week...”

“Lieutenant Shore, are you suggesting that I run WASP operations to fit in with your social calendar?” Commander Shore turned and gazed out of the window, “Besides, last I heard, you wanted me to have Tempest busted down to lieutenant, and packed off to the Antarctic Ocean.”

“I said that about Troy?”

“Yeah Atlanta. You did.” The Commander swung his hover chair around to face his daughter, “So... What’s the score now?”

“I... That is... Troy explained everything. I was just being silly.”

Commander Shore sighed, “Okay... I get the picture. Keep the patrol schedule the way it was.”

“Oh thank you father — you’re boss!”

“Boss?”

Atlanta kissed her father on the cheek, “Just an expression father — and it suits you.”

About six hours later, a weary Doctor Venus walked into Professor Matthew Matic’s workshop at Space City.

“Why Venus!” the Professor exclaimed, looking up from his workbench. “I didn’t expect you back at Space City for weeks.”

Venus smiled, “Hello Matt. Yes, that was the plan. We had a little setback — sabotage!”

“Sabotage?!”

“Yes Matt, it was terrible. There was an explosion in the hospital, all my equipment was destroyed. Thankfully, no-one was hurt.”

“Venus!” Colonel Steve Zodiac called as he entered the workshop. “Jock said he’d seen you heading this way. How come you’re back so soon?”

“Hello Steve,” Venus grinned, giving him a hug. “There was a change of plan. I’m sorry. Were you enjoying not having me around?”

Steve laughed, “Well it has been kinda quiet without you, but say, what’s happening with your project at Marineville?”

“It’s on hold. I’ll tell you about it later. I’ve just been all through it with Commander Zero, and I’m rather tired”.

Venus sat down on a corner of Matt’s workbench, “You start a new patrol tomorrow Steve... Would it be okay if I come along too?”

Steve was delighted, “Of course! Welcome home, as Zoonie would say.”

“And...” Venus asked, a hopeful look on her face, “Can Zoonie come along too?”

“You’ve got a deal Doctor. It’ll be boss to have you both on Fireball again. I thought I was just going to have Matt for company this trip.”

Matt looked at Venus and shrugged, “Yeah, I guess he still doesn’t like the way I make coffee...”

Venus laughed, “I can’t tell you both how good it is to be back.”

“Like a lift home Venus?” Steve offered, seeing how exhausted the Doctor looked.

“Oh yes please Steve. Lieutenant Ninety took Zoonie home a few hours ago. Poor Zoonie, I’ll be so glad to see him.”

Venus didn’t talk much during the drive to her home on Atello Beach, a few miles outside Space City. In fact she fell asleep, with her head resting against Steve’s shoulder.

“You’re home Venus,” Steve said softly, as he brought his hover car to a gentle landing beside Venus’s front door.

“Already?” Venus asked sleepily.

Steve helped her out of the car, and they were greeted by an excited Zoonie chanting ‘Welcome home!’ as they entered the house.

Venus hugged her pet lazoon, “Hello Zoonie. I’ve missed you. I hope you’ve been a good boy.”

“Stop that Zoonie... Stop that Zoonie...” the lazoon recited happily.

Steve laughed. “I guess Zoonie must’ve learned some new phrases from Mrs Zero.”

“Oh, it’s so good to be home.” Venus gazed out of her beach house window at the blue ocean, “Marineville they call it — but it’s miles from the sea.”

“Well,” Steve chuckled, “I guess Space City is more than a few miles from space! Speaking of space, you’d better get some sleep — back to Sector 25 tomorrow afternoon.”

“Steve!” Venus suddenly cried out, “A fish... a big fish!”

Steve hurried over to her side, “What’s the matter Venus? It was probably a dolphin...”

“No Steve. It was huge! And it had great big staring eyes!”

“Hey... calm down.” Steve put a hand on her shoulder, “I don’t see anything out there now... Maybe you’ve been working too hard...”

“But Steve...” Venus became calmer, “You’re right, perhaps I have been overdoing things...”

“You just need to get some rest. Say, I’ll tell Matt, and he can get over here early tomorrow with his fishing rod!”

Venus waved to Steve as he drove away in his hover car. “Well, Zoonie, I guess it’s time for bed.”

Zoonie was agitated as they both went back into the house. The lazoon kept peering out of the window, and then covering his eyes and whimpering.

“There, there, Zoonie,” comforted Venus, “whatever is the matter?” Venus gazed out across the bay, “Did you see something out there too?”

Within an hour, the sun had dipped below the horizon, and a pale crescent moon now hung in the clear Pacific night sky. Try as she might Venus had not been able to calm Zoonie. Woken up for the second time, she climbed out of bed and went back into the lounge. Zoonie was not in his basket, he was staring out of the window again, nervously calling, “Howdy folks... Howdy folks...”

Venus was on the verge of calling Steve when a green reptilian hand suddenly smashed through the front door of her beach house. Zoonie screeched in terror, as an Aquaphibian forced its way through the shattered door, and lumbered into the lounge.

Venus turned and ran back into her bedroom, desperate to reach her ray gun. Steve had insisted she kept one, but she never thought she would have to use it.

There was a crash as a second Aquaphibian entered the beach house. It aimed its rifle at the frantic lazoon.

Venus wrenched open a dressing table drawer, the contents scattering on the carpet as it fell. She stooped to grab the fallen pistol, and quickly fired at the nearest Aquaphibian, which was almost upon her. The creature shrugged off the blast, and continued towards her. She increased the force setting on her gun and fired again. The Aquaphibian staggered backwards.

The second Aquaphibian turned away from Zoonie to aid its companion. It raised its gun and blasted a hole in the bedroom wall behind the space doctor.

“Drop your weapon, Terrainean,” it demanded in a strange gurgling voice, “or die!”

With a screech of rage Zoonie hurled himself onto the back of the Aquaphibian, but it whirled around, flinging the lazoon across the room.

“Zoonie!” Venus shouted as she looked to where her pet had fallen. The butt of a rifle slammed into her right hand and her ray gun fell from her paralysed fingers. “Run Zoonie,” Venus shouted as she was knocked to the ground, “Run!”

The following morning Commander Zero briefed Steve Zodiac on Doctor Venus’s project, “Things are getting critical Steve. The World President is anxious to give people more living space, and we just can’t find more worlds we can colonise.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s really only New Earth. But Commander, once they’ve got the gravity densification completed, and the atmosphere adjusted to Earth like conditions...”

“Yes, you’re right Steve, there’s plenty of room on New Earth for a massive emigration program if need be. It’s all down to politics. New Earth is yesterday’s news. The President wants to pull another rabbit out of the hat. So... if we can’t give him new worlds, he wants to more fully exploit the Earth.”

“And that’s why Venus’s project is so important. I gather there’s some kind of problem?”

“I’ll say there is. Someone sabotaged the equipment Venus was using at Marineville. It was destroyed by a bomb. Their security boys say it was probably coralamics. Luckily no one was hurt.”

“Coralamics? That’s the stuff some of those undersea races use...”

“Yeah, Commander Shore thinks it might be the work of Titan.”

Titan... Sabotage... Steve was starting to worry about a ‘big fish’...

“What’s wrong Steve?” the Commander asked, seeing that the Colonel’s expression had suddenly changed.

“Oh... Probably nothing... Commander, I’d like to just give Venus a call.”

“Sure, go ahead Steve. In fact, it might be an idea to get her over here. Tell her we’ll send a jetmo-cab.”

Steve picked up the phone, and quickly dialed the number. He waited. He felt a cold chill start to spread up his spine. No answer... After what seemed an eternity to Steve, someone did answer, but it wasn’t Venus... “Howdy folks! Howdy folks!”

“Zoonie!” Steve exclaimed, forgetting his worries, “You sure are learning new tricks. Where’s Venus?”

Zoonie started whining and muttering, “Welcome... home... howdy...” He seemed to be desperately trying to say something.

Steve could tell the lazoon was very frightened, “Zoonie, what’s wrong?”

Zoonie started saying two words, over and over, “Run Zoonie! Run Zoonie!”

Steve slammed down the phone and hurried to the door, “Commander, have a security team meet me at Atello Beach! I think something’s happened to Venus!”

Steve Zodiac leapt from his hover car and ran to the beach house — ray gun in hand. “Venus!” he shouted, half hoping his fears were unfounded. Then he saw the shattered front door. Cautiously he edged his way inside the house, listening intently. “Venus!” he called again. A sudden noise made him swing round, and he saw Zoonie crouched in his basket whimpering.

Then Steve saw the blast hole cut into the bedroom wall. He hurried over to the open door. The bedroom was empty, and there, on the floor, lay Venus’s stun-gun.

Outside, half a dozen security guards were surrounding the house, Lieutenant Ninety in command. “Sir!” one of the men called, “Footprints... here... Leading down to the sea!”

Venus slowly opened her eyes, but for a moment could not focus on her surroundings. She felt unsteady on her feet, as if recovering from the effects of a coma ray. Cold, clammy hands held her firmly. Her mind wandered. Where was she? She remembered green reptilian hands smashing their way into her beach house...

Gradually her vision cleared. The sight of Titan sitting high above her on his coral throne brought memory flooding back to her with chilling clarity. Where had the creatures taken her? Was Zoonie safe?

“I do hope my subjects have not harmed you, Terrainean.”

“Who are you?” Venus gasped.

“I am Titan, Lord of the undersea city of Titanica. And you, Doctor Venus,” declared the tyrant menacingly, “are now my prisoner. You will tell me about the drug you have developed at Marineville and the purpose of your accursed experiments there.”

“Drug?” Venus asked, “What drug?”

“Do not attempt to deceive me Terrainean! I will ask you once more Doctor. Tell me about your research at Marineville... Or suffer the consequences.”

Venus struggled uselessly against the vice-like grip of the Aquaphibian who held her, “I’m just performing endurance tests to improve aquanaut stamina. Release me!”

“She is lying your majesty,” Surface Agent X2-Zero observed impassively.

“Obviously,” Titan replied, not taking his eyes from his beautiful captive.

“Very well, I shall find the truth by other means.”

X2-Zero grinned evilly, “Let me persuade her, Majesty.”

“No...” Titan turned to face X2-Zero, “I have more subtle ways of extracting information.” He paused for a moment, turning back to regard the helpless, struggling girl thoughtfully, “X2-Zero, you have done well, and will be rewarded. When I have the information I require, the Terrainean will be taken to Aquatraz. You will train her as my palace slave. She will perform Marina’s... duties.”

“No!” Commander Zero snapped.

“But Commander...” Steve protested.

“Colonel Zodiac, I cannot permit you to take Fireball Junior, or any other craft, on a rescue mission to look for Doctor Venus.” Zero looked anxious, but determined, “This is a job for the WASP. Meanwhile, you are due to launch Fireball XL5 this afternoon, to patrol Sector Two Five.”

“Yes sir.”

“Look Steve, I know how you feel — believe me. But we have a job to do — in space.” Zero tried to sound encouraging, though he didn’t feel too good

about the situation, “The WASP have all the expertise in undersea operations. If anyone can get Venus back, they can.”

“Steve, the Commander’s right,” Matt added, dismally. “Why, Junior couldn’t stand the pressure at the depths where Venus is likely to have been taken... But the WASP have Stingray.”

Steve nodded, “Yeah Matt... Stingray. I sure hope they act fast!”

Within half an hour Commander Shore had briefed the Stingray crew on the kidnapping.

Troy started towards the elevator, Phones and Marina following him, “We’ll get Stingray seaborne immediately sir.”

Shore raised a hand, “Hold your horses, Tempest.”

“Sir?”

“It’s a big ocean Captain. Doctor Venus could be anywhere. We’ll initiate routine procedure, air search, and alert all shipping and submarines.”

“But Commander...” Phones protested, “...We know where Doctor Venus is. She’ll be in Titanica.”

“And we have to get her out of there sir.” Troy added in desperation.

“Captain Tempest, I cannot let you take Stingray to Titanica. If you are right, and Doctor Venus is held captive there, then Titan is sure to be ready and waiting for you.”

Atlanta was shocked, “But father, we have to rescue her.”

Commander Shore swung his hover chair around to face his daughter, “Listen Atlanta, I want to rescue Doctor Venus as much as anyone else, but if she is in Titanica we’ll need a plan to get her out.”

“A plan?!” Atlanta was beginning to sound angry, “Who knows what Titan is doing to the poor girl?”

Commander Shore was adamant, “Lieutenant, organise that air/sea search operation. That’s an order!”

In the heat of the discussion, no one noticed that Marina had quietly slipped out of the Control Room...

Marina quickly made her way to one of the vehicle parking areas. Atlanta had taught her to drive months ago and she’d been allocated her own car. She drove up to the main gate and flashed her WASP pass.

“Off to the beach?” The guard smiled, “Wish I was. Have a good time.”

Marina smiled and nodded as the guard waved her on.

As she drove towards the coast Marina told herself she had no choice. No sense in trying to get permission. She knew Commander Shore would never have allowed her to attempt what she was now planning to do. She was soon parking her car on a quiet secluded beach. She’d been here many times. The sea air was welcoming and strengthened her resolve. A gentle breeze blew through her long hair as she ran down the warm sandy beach to the water’s edge. Without a moment’s hesitation she plunged fully clothed into the sea and disappeared beneath the waves.

Soon Marina was swimming faster than she had ever done before, heading away from the Californian coastline. It did not take long for her to reach her destination. Before her on the seabed lay a small submarine, partially hidden by rocks and sand. It was a compact, shell-like craft. Her father Aphony, had ordered it to be left in readiness for her in case she ever wished to return home swiftly. But she did not intend travelling to Pacifica.

The sub was soon speeding towards Titanica with Marina at the controls. She found herself wondering if she would ever see Troy or her father again,

but she had to try to rescue Doctor Venus from Titan. She knew that Titan would never imagine a mere girl could invade his impenetrable city. However, Marina had committed many of the secret entry codes and passageways of Titanica to memory, during the year she had spent as Titan's slave. She shuddered as she thought of how Venus would suffer if she could not free her from Titan's clutches...

