

## **Chapter 10**

### **Seek And Destroy!**

"Easy Steve, take it easy."

Steve Zodiac opened his eyes to see Matt leaning over him and looking very concerned.

"Matt?"

"What happened Steve? We heard a ruckus after you sent the code message to Robert, thought we'd better let ourselves out of the jail and see if we could help."

Steve sat up and looked around. The jetmobile bay hatch was closed and the air felt good.

"I guess the Aquaphibian was too fast for me Matt. Used his gas gun. Had no choice, had to depressurize to get rid of it."

Matt helped Steve to get to his feet, "Ninety's at the controls. Steve, we're worried about Robert."

"What's happened to Robert?"

"We don't know Steve. XL5 is still flying alongside, but Robert's not responding to the radio. Junior's control cabin is full of that gas so we can't see what's happening over there."

Ninety looked anxiously back from the pilot's seat as Steve and Matt entered the control cabin. "Still no response from Robert, Colonel."

Steve sat down in the co-pilot's seat. He could see a close-up of XL5's smoke filled control cabin on the central monitor.

"Professor, could that smoke harm Robert?"

"I doubt it Steve."

"The radio might be out..."

"No Colonel," Ninety told him, "I checked it out. Tried all frequencies."

Steve was now fully alert, "Matt you and I are going across. Grab us a couple of gas masks and I'll meet you in the ejection room. Keep your eyes peeled Ninety, let us know if you see anything."

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Once again, Marineville was at Battle Stations, hidden deep in its underground bunker.

Captain Jordan still found it hard to believe that Atlanta Shore was a traitor, but the evidence was clear enough. An injured security guard, a stolen gun found in the Swordfish pen with Atlanta's fingerprints on it and, most damning of all, video images of Swordfish emerging from the shattered Ocean Door, with Atlanta Shore at the controls and an Aquaphibian at her side.

Clearly, Atlanta had been working in collusion with Marina for some time. When Marina's apartment had been sealed off by security, Atlanta must have known that evidence would soon be found that she was also a spy.

How many more of Titan's agents had infiltrated Marineville? Jordan glanced suspiciously over at Lieutenant Fisher, who was busy coordinating the search for the stolen submarine.

When Swordfish had blasted its way out into the Pacific Ocean, Lieutenant Fisher had immediately volunteered to take Barracuda in pursuit. Some sixth sense had warned Jordan to keep all the Stingray class subs where they were, in their pens. A quick search had revealed that coralamic explosives had been planted aboard each of the remaining three supersubs. The launch of any one of them would have resulted in massive explosions.

No, Jordan told himself, Fisher must be in the clear, he'd have surely died if he'd tried to take a sub out in pursuit of Swordfish.

Captain Jordan had his orders directly from the World President. Swordfish must be destroyed at all costs

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"If I were back at Marineville," Atlanta Shore thought grimly, "I guess I'd be sending Spearhead jets to blow this sub clean out of the water... I've got to do something... Got to..."

Atlanta's struggles were to no avail; her abductors had tied her very securely to her seat. She couldn't move her arms at all. "Useless! I can't die like this... I can't..."

With an effort of will Atlanta managed to become calmer and forced herself to think. "They were signalling... I've got to send a signal too — contact Marineville." Atlanta glanced across the console to the radio. "That's a joke, tied up like this there's no way to even switch it on."

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Steve and Matt had used their thruster packs to travel over to XL5 and were now cautiously making their way across to the ejection hatch.

"We could be walking into a trap Matt. I'll go inside first. Wait until I give you the all clear."

"Don't take any chances Steve..."

"I won't. I'm shooting first this time. Talk can come later. Same goes for you Professor. Don't wait for an order, shoot on sight. Here goes..."

Matt watched as Steve positioned himself above the hatch in Fireball's upper hull and then slowly disappeared, feet first into the ship.

He waited nervously outside XL5's ejection hatch, his ray gun clenched tightly in his hand. He was relieved when he heard Steve call on his radio,"

"All clear Matt. No sign of the Aquaphibian and the air's okay here."

"Okay Steve, I'm coming aboard."

Steve looked up from a wall console as the Professor stepped out of the ejection tube, "I've activated Fireball's air purification system. While that's taking effect we'll head on up to the main control cabin."

"Okay, Steve."

"Keep your gas mask on just in case, Matt. No telling where that Aquaphibian could be lurking."

As they warily made their way along Fireball's corridors, Steve covered the way ahead with his ray gun, whilst Matt watched out nervously for anyone or anything following them.

Finally they arrived at the main airlock doors of Fireball Junior. The doors had closed automatically when the ship's internal systems had detected the poisonous gas.

"Keep your mask on Matt. If the Aquaphibian is in here it'll use its gas gun for sure."

Steve triggered the manual airlock over-ride and the doors hissed open.

"Don't let the creature get close. They can move fast when they want to."

As the two men made their way through the jetmobile bay the air was more or less free of any sign of the poison gas.

Steve called up Lieutenant Ninety on a secure channel.

"How's the control cabin looking Ninety? We're about to go in."

"It's almost clear of the smoke now Colonel. There's no-one in the pilot seats, and no sign of any movement."

Matt looked anxiously over his shoulder, "He could be anywhere in the ship Steve."

"My guess is he's still in the control cabin Matt and so is Robert... Ready? We'll move in there fast and take control."

Matt checked his ray gun, "Ready Steve."

"Okay, shoot on sight Matt, we're taking no chances."

The control cabin doors slid open, and Steve rushed inside, pistol at the ready. Clouds of the remaining poisonous smoke billowed around his boots.

"Steve!" Matt called out as he almost stumbled over the inert form of Robert lying on the deck. Beside the robot lay the prone unmoving form of the Aquaphibian.

"Get the first aid kit Matt, looks like it's injured."

"It's no use Steve. It's dead. I think it's been electrocuted."

Steve turned his attention to the robot, its head lay at an odd angle against its shoulders. "What about Robert?"

The Professor crouched down beside the robot and inspected the damage. "I think I can fix him Steve. Looks like our Aquaphibian friend tried to crush his neck. Guess he wasn't expecting the high voltage."

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In the Marineville control tower, Lieutenant Fisher looked up from his communications console, "Sir, World Navy reports a positive sighting. Reference one one three, five two one. Swordfish on or near seabed. Running silent."

Captain Jordan nodded, "They have not gotten far..." He walked quickly over to Fisher's console and snapped on the radio, "Tower to Spearhead Flight Leader..."

“Spearhead Flight Leader to Tower. Receiving you. Over...”

“This is Captain Jordan. Target vessel has been detected at position one one three, five two one. Target appears to be adopting silent running, possibly stationary on the ocean floor. Seek and destroy target — repeat — Seek and destroy!”

“Flight Leader to Tower, PWOR. E.T.A. four minutes.”

Lieutenant Fisher was glad that he hadn’t had to relay that order.

It was a death sentence for Atlanta Shore...

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Atlanta Shore was painfully aware of the minutes ticking by as she sat helplessly at the controls of Swordfish. She remembered another time, another submarine. She’d faced death then and had come up with a solution. “The engines... If I can switch them on and off... Might get picked up by sonar. I don’t have to be original. I just have to stop that missile attack.” Somehow it had been a lot easier the last time; for one thing she had not been tied to her seat.

The engine control lever was at shoulder level. Atlanta tried to reach the lever with her chin, straining forward against the ropes that bound her, but it was useless. She thought for a moment and then hurriedly began prizing off her right boot with her left foot. It took several more precious minutes but finally the boot fell to the deck.

“Now... Let’s see if my yoga lessons were worth all that time and effort...” Leaning back in the chair, Atlanta raised her right leg as high as she could. Her foot made contact with the control lever. “Not exactly comfortable...” she winced. Gradually she brought the lever down, then pushed it back up again. “Getting the hang of it. Now for some Morse code. I just hope somebody up there is listening...”

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Flying low over the Pacific, a squadron of WASP Spearhead jets was preparing to attack their target. Sonar buoys had been dropped into the sea in the target area. Now they were sending back 3D sound pictures, pinpointing Swordfish's location on the seabed.

"Spearhead Flight Leader to Tower. Swordfish located on ocean floor. Preparing to make attack run. Say... Sonar is picking up engine noise. Guess they're making a run for it! Beginning attack... Now!"

Five jets screamed over the waves, each firing an air to sea missile. The missiles plunged into the ocean and dived towards their target.

Atlanta went rigid with fear as explosions began to rock Swordfish.

"Too late..." she continued her operation of the engine lever, if only to concentrate on something other than certain death. She could hear the hull creaking under the intense pressure of the blasts and somewhere behind her, water was starting to pour noisily onto the deck.

"Missed!" reported the squadron leader. "Circling around for another run... This time we'll get her for sure."

In the Marineville Control Tower, Captain Jordan was staring incredulously at a video screen. The screen displayed the sonar pattern relayed from the Spearhead aircraft as a ragged line. "Mon dieu!" he exclaimed, "Morse code!" on his monitor the captain could clearly read the coded signal from the engine noise, "... we surrender... we surrender..."

Jordan slammed his hand down on the radio transmit button, "Break off the attack! This is Jordan. Do you hear me? Break off, abort attack!"

Two missiles had already left the leading aircraft as the attack was cancelled. The missiles plunged into the ocean, exploding seconds later, sending plumes of water hundreds of feet into the air.

“This is Flight Leader... Attack aborted... Standing by for further orders.”

Captain Jordan wiped his brow, “So... Am I next for the chop for disobeying

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“Lieutenant Drake!” Commander Zero bellowed, as he sat at his desk in the control room at Space City. “Where in blazes are XL3 and XL14?”

“They’ll be here within two hours Commander,” the Lieutenant answered nervously. “Fireball XL17 will be ready for launch in thirty minutes, sir.”

Zero could see the worry in the young lieutenant’s eyes. He walked over to join her beside the space sector charts. “Lieutenant, we’re not writing them off; they are just ‘out of contact’.”

“Yes sir.”

“They’ll be okay, you’ll see. Ninety’s one of the best... One of the best.”

“Sir... I...”

The telephone began to ring.

“What in thunder!” Zero exclaimed as he hurried back to his desk, “Why can’t I get some peace and quiet around here!”

He grabbed the receiver, “Zero here, make it snappy!” His demeanour changed abruptly, “Mister President... Sir... We... That is, I am doing all I can here...”

The World President cut in, “No need for explanations Zero. I know the situation. You and I both served in the last space-war. We are veterans. I can talk to you man to man.”

“Sir?”

“Listen Wilbur, I can see that the World Space Patrol is inadequately funded.”



“It is? Er yes, it is sir.”

“We’ve lost good people due to this miserly shoe string budgeting. That’s changing as of now. I want you to draft up plans for a real space navy. Earth needs space warships; the best money can buy.”

“But the United Planets Organisation... The Regular Treaty...”

“The UPO can bleat all they like — we have a destiny, a duty — to rule this universe.”

“Yes sir,” Zero acknowledged cautiously. “But...”

“I know what you’re going to say Wilbur, you need the men as well as the ships. But see here, you’ve got good men out there commanding tiny ships. Put those men in command of battle cruisers. The crews can be reassigned from the Army, they can follow orders and press buttons as well as any. No need for the handpicked ‘best of the best’ approach. You’ll need brawn as well as brains for those ships.”

“Yes sir. I understand sir.”

“Send me details of what you need for your space fleet, and I’ll see to it that you get the funding.”

“Sir? Er, I’ll have to speak with General Rossiter, he...”

“From now on, Space General Zero, you report directly to me. Understood?”

“Er... Yes sir. Understood sir.”

“Good man.”

As Space General Wilbur J. Zero hung up the phone his eyes had a glazed look.

“Bad news sir?” Drake asked hesitantly.

“I’m not sure Lieutenant... Maybe it’s Christmas.”