

## **Chapter 15**

### **Highjacked**

Atlanta Shore sat in the co-pilot's seat of the sleek XL7 Junior spacecraft as it sped through the stratosphere, far above the eastern United States. Captain Jordan was standing close behind her, his hands resting lightly on the back of her chair.

Space General Wilbur Zero glanced over at his two WASP passengers, "We'll soon be over the Caribbean; I'm taking her down. We should arrive in Unity City in about four minutes."

As the silver spacecraft descended through the cloud layer, the sparkling blue ocean suddenly came into view.

"Oh Jacques..." Atlanta sighed, "It looks so peaceful down there."

"What in space?!" Zero suddenly exclaimed as he stared at the central viewer, "I'm getting a radar warning... Something up there ahead of us, in that cloud bank..."

Atlanta leaned forward in her seat, staring up at the distant clouds in alarm, "Aircraft?"

"Well," General Zero snorted irritably as he adjusted the central viewer, "I sure don't think it's gonna be angels..."

On the screen, insect-like silhouettes were coming into sharp focus — jet fighters with characteristic down-swept wing tips, and up-swept tail planes.

"Vipers!" Atlanta exclaimed.

“Yeah, and they’re unmarked... ” Zero observed darkly, as they all stared apprehensively at the black aircraft on the central viewer. “I don’t like the look of this!”

Captain Jordan gripped the back of Atlanta’s chair, “They’re carrying hydromic depth charges General; they must be World Navy planes.”

Zero switched on the radio, “This is Space General Zero of the World Space Patrol. Viper aircraft — identify yourselves.”

There was no response.

“Somehow,” Jordan said as he watched the sinister-looking aircraft on the viewer, “I don’t think they are going to be friends...”

Atlanta turned anxiously to Zero, “Can we outrun them?”

The General did not answer.

“Ross!” he barked into the intercom, “Brace for evasive manoeuvres! Break out the acceleration couches. This is gonna be rough...”

Zero jabbed buttons on his console, “Atlanta, let Jordan have your seat.”

Atlanta quickly released her safety belt and got to her feet.

Zero turned to look up at the Captain, “Sit down Jordan, and get Atlanta on your lap fast!”

Suddenly six of the fighters broke cover and hurtled down from the clouds on an intercept course, firing a spread of air to air missiles as they came.

“Here they come!” Jordan shouted as he grabbed Atlanta and hugged the startled girl to him.

“And here we go!” Zero exclaimed as he thrust the control yoke forward and sent the ship into a screaming power dive.

The blue Caribbean rushed up to meet them...

A dozen missiles exploded around XL7 Junior as it hit the water and plunged down into the depths. Zero hurriedly swung the spaceship onto a new heading as he checked his console, "So far so good!"

"They'll be getting a fix on our position," Jordan told him, "then they'll drop their hydromic depth charges."

"So we're getting out of here. Those Vipers are fast but they can't make a vertical climb..."

Atlanta watched in amazement as the sea ahead of them started to brighten. It took a moment for her to realize that they were now pointing directly upwards, towards the surface. The ship's artificial gravity insisted that 'down' was always towards the deck, whatever the ship's actual orientation might be.

"Ross? You all set for a high G blast-away?"

"All ready sir," came the reply from Junior's rear cabin where the XL7 skipper was guarding the captured government agent Higgs.

"Hold tight you two," Zero told Jordan and Atlanta, "the gravity compensators may not cushion all of the G forces."

Zero fired the main motors and Fireball Junior surged upward.

Atlanta found herself being pressed back into Jordan's lap as the ship continued to accelerate. There was a jolt as the spaceship shot into the air and continued to hurtle up into the sky.

Some of the startled Viper pilots managed to launch a few missiles, but there was not enough time for them to fire a second salvo.

"Full boost!" Zero warned as he fired the ship's boosters.

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At World Security Headquarters, Unity City, Admiral Beatty glowered at the nervous and perspiring naval officer who stood stiffly at attention in front of his desk.

"The fools! How long before they reach Unity City?"

"About five minutes sir. Should I inform the President, sir?"

"No! I'll inform the President myself."

Once the officer had gone, Beatty snatched up the telephone on his desk and quickly dialled a number.

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After making his phone call, Admiral Beatty carefully studied a computer schematic of the Earth. As the wire frame globe slowly rotated, various symbols glowed brightly, each depicting a ship or military base.

As Beatty keyed in information, different coloured arcs appeared on the globe, each representing a flight path down over the southern hemisphere. Finally the Admiral cleared the globe of all trajectories but one; a flight path arcing away from Unity City in Bermuda. He studied his wristwatch for a moment before shutting down the console.

Beatty pressed a button on his desk, "Send my car round immediately. The Duty Officer will accompany me."

Beatty pressed another button and a wall panel slid aside, revealing a safe. The safe door swung open as soon as Beatty keyed in a series of numbers and pressed his palm against the sensor. He removed a half dozen folders, glancing briefly at each one. Each bore the 'Top Secret' designation. Finally he scooped up a sheaf of papers. He closed the safe and began to walk back to his desk.

As he did so he let one of the sheets of paper flutter to the floor. He stood and regarded the fallen document for a moment before picking it up and continuing to his desk. He drew a cigarette lighter from his pocket and set

fire to the sheet of paper, being careful to blow out the flame before dropping the remains into a waste paper bin. The burnt fragment of paper still bore the official Presidential Seal.

Beatty put the remaining documents into a slim attaché case, grabbed a gun from a desk drawer and left his office.

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"Sir..." a young naval officer ventured, as he sat opposite Admiral Beatty in the plush hover-limousine, "I don't understand sir, you haven't ordered a plane, why are we going to the airport?"

"President's orders." Beatty told him. "When we arrive I want you to go up to the Admin Block..."

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Fireball XL7 Junior arrived at Unity City Airport without further incident and General Zero, Captain Jordan and Atlanta were met by General Rossiter and driven off to World Security Headquarters as soon as they disembarked.

Space Lieutenant Ross was relieved to be back at the controls of his own ship as he requested take off clearance for his return flight to Space City.

Twenty five minutes later Ross was growing increasingly impatient as he argued over the radio with Unity City Flight Control, "Well what's the delay? Space General Zero will have my guts for garters if he finds out this ship is still sitting on the tarmac. I should be back at Space City."

"Orders. Look Ross, don't ask me. I've just been told it's orders from on high."

"General Zero didn't tell me anything about this..."

"Listen buddy, your General Zero is a very small wheel here. You're in Unity City now."

As Ross flicked off the radio in disgust he saw an airport security vehicle heading his way, lights flashing. "This is Airport Security," a voice announced over the radio, "XL7, lower your boarding steps, we're coming aboard."

"Why? What's going on?" Ross demanded irritably.

"Don't ask questions spaceman, just get that gangway deployed at the double."

Ross reluctantly complied with the 'request', but he took the precaution of grabbing a coma ray pistol from a locker on his way to the rear of the ship.

The security vehicle drew up at the foot of Junior's steps and an armed guard quickly opened the rear door. A uniformed naval man and someone in a dark greatcoat stepped out and hurried up the steps and into Fireball Junior.

"What's this all about?" Ross asked, "This is my ship and I'm under direct orders from Space General Zero."

"I am also under direct orders Lieutenant," the man in the coat stated icily.

The three men walked into Junior's control cabin. Taking off his coat and tossing it over the back of the co-pilot's seat, the man glared at Ross, "Well, do you recognize me?"

Ross shrugged, "Yeah, you look a bit like that Beatty guy."

Beatty glanced over at his aide. The officer removed a document from his inside pocket and handed it to Ross.

"This is my authority Lieutenant. I'm taking command of this vessel."

"But..."

"Read it man. Look at the signature. Look at the seal. You are now under my orders. My presence on this craft is to remain secret. You will be given flight

clearance immediately." Beatty sat down in the co-pilot's seat, "Prepare for take-off. We're going to Space City."

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A visibly shocked Vice World President Vanessa Copeland sat at the head of a large table in a secure meeting room in World Security Headquarters, Unity City. She struggled to believe the disturbing reports she had just received from the senior officers that sat around the table with her.

"These are very serious allegations, Captain Jordan. We know your reputation, so we don't think that you make them lightly but..."

"I've always been loyal to the World President, but I swore my oath to the Service not to any one man and if that man is wrong, it is my duty to speak out."

"Very commendable Captain. And you, Miss Shore, where do you fit into all this?"

"I've been an officer in the WASP for eight years. I've always been loyal, as has my father..."

"We'll leave your father out of this for the moment Miss Shore."

Jordan interrupted, "That should be Lieutenant Shore, Madam Vice President"

Atlanta related her story about the kidnapping and attack on Marineville by government agents.

"Captain Jordan, do you believe this story?"

"I did not at first, but I do now. Corroboration will come from the government agent we have brought for interrogation."

"Commander, ah, General Zero, these are very serious allegations you have made."

"I'm no politician, Madam Vice President. I'm a simple soldier. I came up through the ranks. And I've served in a space war, I know what it's like. Most of you are too young to remember."

"But there's no threat to the Earth, surely?" Copeland queried.

"That was the story that was used to stop panic" responded General Rossiter who had arranged this secret meeting. "Governments have always manipulated publicity to suit themselves. My aim is to stop a war with the Undersea Peoples and to stop a space war. I want to stop one man wrecking something we've worked so hard for and so many people have died for."

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A worried looking grey-suited man hurried into Admiral Beatty's outer office. "I have to speak to Admiral Beatty..."

"I'm afraid he's not in." his secretary told him.

"Where is he?"

"I'm afraid he didn't tell me. He called for his car about twenty minutes ago... "

"I suppose he must be with the President. I'll come back later."

Another grey-suited man strode into the outer office.

"I have to speak with..."

"He's not in. He's with the President."

"But Operation Strike Fear has reached Phase Two. He said he wanted to be informed immediately..."

"I'll have to call the Presidential Palace and see if we can contact Admiral Beatty there. We can't afford for this to go wrong."

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Sometime after their meeting with the Vice President Captain Jordan and Atlanta Shore were sitting in a spacious lounge in the Officers Club — only a short walk away from World Security HQ. They were waiting for General Zero to inform them of what action would be taken against the WP following their damning reports.

Massive windows overlooked the nearby Unity City Harbour and Bermudan coastline. Along one wall hung paintings of historic and contemporary naval vessels.

"I love the sea Atlanta. Yes it's dangerous and it's wild, but it is my life. "

Atlanta put her head in her hands, "Oh Jacques, what can we do? I have to help my father..."

"Try to relax Atlanta. We are doing all we can."

"They don't believe us do they?"

"Committing treason is not something people do lightly, Atlanta. In my experience of politics there is always a lot of talking before anything is done."

Jordan got up and walked over to study one particular painting.

Atlanta joined him. "My ship, Atlanta. The WNS Atlantis."

"She certainly is a fine looking vessel Jacques."

"Have you been to Unity City before?"

"Not since I was around eight years old."

"Would you like me to show you the sights? And then perhaps we could go for a meal while we are waiting, I know some excellent restaurants."

"Oh Jacques, yes, that would be wonderful. But, look at me. We left Marineville in such a hurry I must look a real mess and I've nothing to wear I'm afraid."

"Then that is easily solved. We shall start with a shopping trip and I will buy you the clothes you would like to wear."

"Oh I couldn't have you do that... Could I?"

"Yes you could. And I would be delighted to share the day with you."

"OK Jacques. It's a deal. But I must ask you one thing first..."

"Ask away."

"When you came to Marineville before, you spoke with a much stronger accent..."

"Ah, yes. Well you see, as captain of a naval vessel I have to speak clearly to give orders and..."

"So, am I to assume you are giving me orders?"

"Well of course not Atlanta. I must confess to you that, well, I find that my French accent, er, attracts the ladies..."

"Ah, I see Jacques. And... Do you want to attract this particular lady?"

"I am enchanted by zis particular lady. Now, Atlanta, let me 'ow you say? Show you ze sights."

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Later that afternoon Rossiter and Zero were called back to World Security HQ and waited expectantly to hear the Vice President's decision.

"The agent didn't say very much," General Rossiter said quietly referring to the interrogation of WIN agent Higgs that he had just attended "but what he did say, together with what Jordan told us, is leading a trail directly to Beatty."

Zero nodded, "I guess Admiral Beatty will have a few tough questions to answer."

"Assuming he's found," Rossiter carefully lit a cigar, "It seems he's gone AWOL."

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"Smooth ride, Lieutenant," Admiral Beatty said approvingly. "I may order some of these for the Navy as run-about."

"Yes Admiral," Ross acknowledged tonelessly.

"You are an astronaut?"

"Yes sir."

"I gather these little run-about's can travel underwater. Is that right?"

"Yes Admiral."

"Is that just in theory? I mean I've seen the specs, but do you have any personal experience in taking these tubs underwater?"

"Yes Admiral. It's pretty routine." Ross checked his instruments, "We're nearing Space City Admiral," he announced with unmasked relief in his voice, "I'll radio for landing clearance."

"No, Lieutenant, you won't do that. We're not going to Space City. That was a necessary misdirection. You will in fact, continue to this position," Beatty handed Ross a slip of paper, "Have you sufficient fuel?"

"Yes sir."

"Inform me when we are near those co-ordinates. You'll be able to demonstrate this craft's underwater capabilities. I shall sleep now."