

Chapter 16

Risking Everything

General Rossiter looked up as an aide beckoned. "Okay, Wilbur, guess this is it..." General Rossiter and General Zero followed the aide into a nearby office where the Vice President sat waiting for them.

She gestured for the two men to sit down in front of her desk.

"General Rossiter, I'm going to put my cards on the table. But first I need to know — have we got the backing of the Space Patrol?"

Rossiter glanced at Zero, "Yes, the Space Patrol is behind you. We have probably more at stake than the other services."

"General McCormack has pledged the support of the World Army Airforce."

Rossiter frowned, "What about Beatty? He's the President's man. Does that mean the World Navy is still out on a limb?"

"Talking to the senior officers of the World Navy, most would support us."

Rossiter leaned forward in his chair, "What about Beatty?"

The woman spread her hands, "We don't know. Rumour has it that he's on some mission for the President. But obviously, we can't ask the President. As it is we are taking a chance. We think we have identified and distracted most of the President's spies."

"I hope you've dealt with all of them... We are all risking everything here." said Rossiter

"I realize that. But we have to proceed as planned, and also try to find out what devilment the President and Beatty might have cooked up between them."

There was a knock at the door and an aide hurried into the office, "Madam Vice President, we are advised that there is a hostile Terror Fish fleet approaching Australia!"

"This doesn't change anything; but I must find out what the World Navy can do about this."

Rossiter and Zero exchanged a meaningful glance as they left the office.

"No Wilbur," Rossiter said firmly, "we can't have Fireball ships operating in Earth's atmosphere, it's against all the treaties and regulations."

"Even in an emergency?"

"Even in an emergency... Unless that is, the World President personally sanctions it. This is a job for the World Navy."

They left World Security HQ and headed for the nearby Officers Club where they would update Jordan and Atlanta.

"Sir..." a junior officer called from her console, "I think you should see this..."

A young Space Patrol lieutenant strode over to look at the girl's monitor, "What the..?" He snapped on the radio without taking his eyes from the radar screen, "Perimeter Tracking here, we've got a blip on the scope and it looks like a Fireball Junior. We have nothing scheduled... Position nine, one, five, zero black. Course seven, one, five, zero green."

"Roger Tracking. That's XL7. We've been trying to reach them and they aren't answering." responded Captain Anderson.

"Wasn't that the ship the Commander, I mean the General, took?"

"Yeah, it sure was. Maintain tracking that craft. Notify any change in course and speed." ordered Anderson from where he sat at the main control desk in Zero's absence. He turned to look at Lieutenant Drake at the console opposite, "Keep trying to contact them Lieutenant"

"This is Space City Tower to XL7. Come in Lieutenant Ross... I don't get it sir. Their radio seems to be operating - they just aren't responding."

"Get me General Rossiter."

The World President stood in his opulent lounge in the Presidential Palace, smoking a cigar and drinking a brandy. He smiled to himself as he surveyed the view from the window. A car had just arrived in the palace courtyard. He refilled his glass as a voice on an intercom announced his visitor.

A uniformed courier saluted and handed the President a folder bearing an embossed seal.

Once the man had left, the President tore off the seal and quickly inspected the contents of the folder. He switched on an intercom and called his personal assistant, "Alvarez."

A dark-suited man entered the lounge and waited silently for instructions.

"It's starting. Arrange to convene an emergency meeting of the World leaders and have my Announcement ready."

"Yes sir, "Alvarez acknowledged. "Sir, there is a problem."

The President raised an eyebrow, "A problem?"

"You've sent Admiral Beatty off on a secret mission."

The President remained impassive, "Have I?"

"Admiral Beatty was going to arrange the final details of operation Strike Fear sir. Whilst we are trying to follow the plan as far as we can without Admiral Beatty we aren't totally sure what needs to happen."

"I have sent Admiral Beatty on a secret mission. Did he tell you this?"

"Well, no sir... But... Roper observed that the Admiral called for a driver and went to the airport. The Admiral then commandeered a Fireball spacecraft."

"A Fireball craft was at the airport?"

"Yes sir. A Fireball Junior sir. General Zero arrived in it this morning."

"General Zero came here in a Fireball craft... And where is General Zero now?"

"He's at the Officer's Club with General Rossiter and the two WASP officers he arrived with sir." said Alvarez

"Have you got a man watching them?"

"Of course sir."

The President sipped his brandy thoughtfully, "Who is in charge of World Navy operations in Admiral Beatty's absence?"

"Admiral Bristol sir."

"Send him to me, now."

"Yes sir. Sir, the Vice President is obviously very concerned about the Terror Fish fleet approaching Australia..."

The President smiled, "Yes, she would be wouldn't she? She's a politician. Let her run round to the media and make it look like she's doing her bit for the folks back home. While she's doing that she's not causing me any trouble. Just make sure you have a final look at what she actually says before it goes out to the press. You know the drill."

"Yes sir."

"Is my press release ready?"

"Yes sir."

"You may go."

As he flew XL7 Junior over the Pacific, Lieutenant Ross was anxiously listening to the incoming radio messages, "Space City to XL7, come in XL7... Lieutenant Ross answer at once!"

Admiral Beatty still sat in the co-pilot's seat, eyes closed and apparently asleep. The Admiral opened his eyes, "No, Lieutenant. I've ordered you not to respond to any radio messages. Surely we are nearing our destination by now?"

"We'll be there soon sir."

After receiving the report from Space City about XL7 Junior, Rossiter and Zero left the Officers Club and returned to World Security Headquarters

A short time later Rossiter studied the electronic map of the southern hemisphere from his office desk with a worried look on his face. "This man of yours — Ross, how reliable is he?"

"He's one hundred percent loyal sir," Zero replied carefully.

"You do realise we're going to have to shoot him down."

"Let me try to reach him, sir. If I can be patched through to Space City I can contact the ship direct."

"Try. I'll let you try but the planes are going to be despatched anyway."

A junior officer worriedly addressed Rossiter, "The World Navy say they can't spare those planes General."

"What?!"

"There's some kind of flap on in the Eastern Pacific. The Navy are scrambling all aircraft with the kind of range we need to intercept XL7 sir."

Rossiter frowned, "This is starting to look like some kind of conspiracy..."

Meanwhile General Zero was calling XL7 on the radio and getting no response.

"I don't understand this. I'd never have thought it of Ross."

"Is it Ross? Could anyone else be flying that ship?"

"A Fireball Junior is very difficult to fly in atmosphere. They don't behave like aircraft. There aren't many prospective pilots who have the required reactions and abilities... I think it's most unlikely someone else is piloting that ship."

"Don't you have a robot that can fly one..."

"Yeah but it's a one off... It has problems."

"If they can build one robot..."

Zero resumed shouting at Ross.

Captain Jordan and Atlanta Shore had decided to remain in the Officers Club Lounge while they waited for their return flight to Marineville to be arranged.

Atlanta Shore shook her head, "I wish poor Troy were here, he'd know what to do, I know he would. They shouldn't have imprisoned father. This would never have happened if he'd still been in command of the WASP."

Captain Jordan shrugged, "But Atlanta, I'm in charge of the WASP..."

"Well what are you doing? Why are you here? Why aren't you doing something?!"

Jordan sighed, "Atlanta, please. If I had my way, I'd be on my ship going to meet this threat."

Atlanta became calmer, "Jacques, what direction is this enemy fleet approaching from?"

"From map reference seven seven three Atlanta."

"But Titanica is nowhere near those co-ordinates Jacques."

"Well Atlanta, Titan is very devious..."

"But we don't think Terror Fish have that kind of range. They don't operate that far from Titanica. Not in any numbers. And why didn't any of our tracking stations pick them up?"

"That is a very good question. I shall have some hard questions for those tracking stations when I get back to Marineville."

"It doesn't make sense Jacques."

"Perhaps Titan has developed Terror Fish with longer ranges."

"But there are no deep undersea trenches in that area. How could they have eluded seven WASP tracking stations and five patrol areas between Titanica and Australia?"

"What are you saying Atlanta? Are you saying they are not Terror Fish?"

"I don't know... It just doesn't make sense. I wish father were here, he'd know what to do. Terror Fish normally lay in wait and ambush unwary craft. They don't go en masse like a fleet. Troy says they are very unwieldy, they don't steer well in shallow waters."

"How would Tempest know that?"

"He captured one once. We examined it."

"Atlanta... I do not know what to think. But you are right we should not just sit here. We will get over to the World Security building. If nothing else you can give them your expertise on Terror Fish."

"I've been thinking Jaques..."

"Oh?"

"You've been saying how you wanted to get back to your ship, the Atlantis, so you could tackle the Terror Fish threat."

"Yes?"

"This is a job for the WASP."

"But the World Navy..."

"The World Navy won't reach the area in time."

"What are you saying?"

"We could get at least one Stingray class vessel to the attack zone in a couple of hours, maybe less."

"What could one little WASP sub do to combat twenty or so Terror Fish?"

"I intend to find out, Captain Jordan. We can get Swordfish transported from Marineville to the South Pacific."

"But it would be futile."

"It's never futile to try to save lives Captain."

"But Atlanta, I would be sending men to certain death..."

"No you wouldn't. I intend to captain Swordfish. I'm the most senior qualified officer."

"Must I remind you Lieutenant — I am in command of the WASP."

"Of course Jacques. We'll need a fast heavy lifter; I'm sure I can persuade Wilbur to help us out..."

The World President sat at his desk.

In front of him sat a half dozen men and women in business suits.

The World President studied the brief report that had just been handed to him and then tossed it to the side of his desk,

"I'm really disappointed in General Zero. Well, he can answer the world leaders when they want to know why a fully armed WSP spacecraft is running amok in Earth atmosphere. If nothing else it'll distract the members of the World Council from my upcoming announcement — and point out to General Zero that he shouldn't be trying to play politics. He can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Nevertheless, I don't believe I can afford to wait for the actual attack on Australia. I smell a plot. I shall forestall it. Have your forces in place. Have that old fool McCormack attend me. I intend to make my Announcement flanked by the head of the World Army Airforce and the acting head of the World Navy."

"Freighter SF7 to Space City, request landing clearance."

"Space City to SF7, do not land, repeat do not land. Proceed directly to WASP HQ Marineville. You are to make all possible speed."

Ross turned to Admiral Beatty, "We have reached the co-ordinates you gave me sir."

"Beatty nodded. "Take us down into the water Lieutenant, heading three, one, five, zero green, depth sixty feet."

"Yes sir."