

Chapter 17

Collaboration in the Deep

Space Freighter SF7 had collected Swordfish from Marineville and then picked up Atlanta from Unity City as ordered. SF7 had then dropped the supersub and her crew off at the WASP base in Brisbane, Australia for pre-launch checks before returning to Space City over an hour ago.

Atlanta Shore now sat at the controls of the supersub with Lieutenant John Fisher who had volunteered to be her co-pilot.

Was she ready for this mission?

"Tower to Swordfish. Please report situation." came the voice of Relief Controller Lieutenant Aston over the radio from Marineville.

"Swordfish to Tower. We are ready for immediate launch." replied Atlanta

"Good luck Lieutenant. The navy is on its way but..."

"I understand the situation sir. The WASP have been up against tougher odds."

"Very good. Proceed with orders..."

"P.W.O.R."

Atlanta forced herself to keep her voice calm as she began her first, and possibly her last undersea mission. "Rear hydroplanes to thirty degrees. Ahead rate two. Flood tanks one and two."

"Aye sir," Lieutenant Fisher acknowledged a little nervously...

"Green twenty," Atlanta ordered crisply. "Keep a sharp look out with those hydrophones..."

Lieutenant Ross piloted Fireball Junior down into an undersea canyon. Rocky cliffs loomed up on either side of the spacecraft as it moved slowly through the murky depths.

Admiral Beatty was flicking the radio switches methodically. He seemed to be transmitting some kind of coded message. Ross couldn't make it out and by now he knew better than to ask questions. He wasn't about to get any answers from the Admiral.

In a small, dark under sea control-room, lights began to flicker on. Consoles hummed into life as automated systems activated. On a video monitor an image of a rocky cavern was displayed. Sea water rapidly began to fill the cave.

Fireball Junior entered the cavern and water tight doors closed behind it. Ross brought his craft to rest on the sandy floor of the small cave as instructed. The water level began dropping rapidly.

Ross wasn't looking at the dropping water level, he was looking down the barrel of a gun.

"No Lieutenant," Beatty told him coldly, "you aren't going anywhere... Ever!"

"Swordfish approaching designated area sir. Still no Terror Fish sightings reported by our tracking stations." reported Lieutenant Aston, standing in front of the Marineville Control Room Videophone.

"And the World Navy task force?" responded Captain Jordan over the scrambled line from Unity City Airport, where he was waiting for his flight back to Marineville

"Task Force at map reference five one two, one one eight sir."

"They've made good time. It'll still be a couple of hours before they reach the area..."

"Sir, Neptune has launched her long range aircraft in case they can pick anything up from the air."

"Good. Exactly what I would have done."

The Vice President took a deep breath and activated her video phone. The video screen blurred briefly and then the word 'Scrambled' appeared in the top left corner, above the images of two uniformed men.

"General McCormack here Ma'am."

"Admiral Bristol reporting Ma'am".

"Gentlemen, I must stress this Skyray conference call is for your eyes and ears only. In fact, it is not taking place at all. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Understood sir."

"Very well. The next voice you hear will be that of a gentleman known to us all only as 'S'."

Another image appeared on the shared Skyray screens, an image that simply displayed the words 'Sound only selected'.

"Madam Vice President, gentlemen. I will be brief. I will simply give you my unofficial advice and support. As you are aware, the Universal Secret Service cannot and will never, interfere in matters of the Earth's internal security. After the creation of the World Intelligence Network, such matters became solely their responsibility. However, there is inevitably a degree of crossover between our two agencies. Up until a few years ago, exchange of

information between the USS and WIN was effective and relatively seamless. However, over the last three years relationships between the USS and WIN have deteriorated, becoming somewhat strained. Whilst investigating a conspiracy to destroy the entire Solar System, my agents also uncovered some disturbing things taking place within the World Government, but since this is outside of our sphere of operations, we naturally informed WIN. No action appears to have been taken. The situation is now critical. We, unofficially, believe that WIN is seriously compromised at a very high level."

S paused to clear his throat, "More importantly and also unofficially, we believe the Earth now has a rogue President acting to the detriment of the planet's population. You must collectively act before it is too late."

A grey suited man sat at a glass and chrome desk in an expensively appointed office. He spoke urgently on the phone to his WIN section head. "I don't like it. The Boss and the Admiral might have cooked up something between them but I'm not sure the Boss really knows what's going on. I think it might be time to start doing some damage control. Yes... I agree... Yes I've got the combination codes for the safe... Oh, she's still running around like a headless chicken about this attack on Australia. She won't get in my way." He put the phone down.

Another phone rang. He picked it up and spoke to Alvarez, the President's PA.

"No sir, no word yet from Admiral Beatty. The attack's continuing as planned. We are doing what we can to follow the plan. The operatives all have their instructions anyway".

"I don't understand it!" General Zero exclaimed. "A Fireball Junior can't just disappear..."

“Has it been shot down?” asked Rossiter

“No. The planes are still searching. They haven’t spotted the Terror Fish or XL7 Junior and they are supposedly in the same area.”

“Perhaps the President is right. Your spacecraft has been captured by the undersea people.”

Lieutenant Ross struggled in vain to free himself. He had been gagged with a bandage and secured to one of the emergency couches in Junior’s jetmobile bay.

Beatty had donned a World Space Patrol wetsuit and was now in the under-sea control room. He had transferred the paperwork he had brought with him into a stubby torpedo-shaped watertight case.

Now Beatty was carefully checking information on the various consoles. He turned and opened a door to a large storage area. There were racks of packing cases from floor to ceiling. Beatty walked over to some crates labelled ‘Danger — High Explosives’. Opening the crate, he selected a box with a particular code number.

He quickly checked the contents. They were oddly shaped organic looking objects. He walked back out to the cave where Fireball Junior had been left. With only a glance at the spacecraft Beatty made his way to the closed outer door and began carefully attaching the sticky explosive material around the edges. Once he was finished, he inserted a small detonator and headed swiftly back to the control room.

Back in the control room, Admiral Beatty activated a console which displayed maps of the seabed. He began studying the maps and charts carefully.

A short while later the Admiral was sitting at the controls of a small two-person submarine. It was a smooth silver-grey, cylindrical hulled sub with

a bubble canopy. In the seat behind Beatty was the watertight document case.

He ran through pre-launch checks. Plugged into the console was a small radio device.

Now back at the Marineville Control Tower, Captain Jaques Jordan was staring incredulously at the situation reports. "This doesn't make any sense! All of the reconnaissance flights have drawn a blank. There's no sign of any Terror Fish activity. No wake, no track of any Terror Fish. The Navy reported clearly identified tracking but now there's just no trace. Get me Swordfish, Lieutenant."

"Atlanta, the aerial search has found nothing. It's entirely up to you now."

At the controls of Swordfish, Atlanta glanced over at Fisher. He shook his head, "Nothing yet sir."

"I understand sir. We are entering area three one five now. No sign of anything unusual." said Atlanta

"Are you absolutely certain?" queried Jordan

Atlanta exchanged another glance with Fisher, "Absolutely certain sir. We know what Terror Fish sound like."

"Even if the World Navy don't..." Fisher muttered.

"Very well. Initiate search pattern. From now on maintain radio silence. You're on your own now Swordfish. Good luck."

Admiral Beatty was steering his mini-sub away from the under-sea installation. After only a few minutes the small craft was rocked by an

explosion. Smiling to himself with satisfaction, he adjusted the controls and began to accelerate.

Rocks fell around Fireball Junior, some bouncing off the hull as water began to flood into the cavern.

In the jetmobile bay, Ross was struggling to get his hands free from the restraining straps that held him down.

He managed to turn and began to use his belt buckle to saw through a strap.

Water was gushing into the control room. Several of the control panels began to short circuit and flames erupted as an electrical fire started. The flames illuminated the open doorway to the storage area and the crates labelled 'High explosives'.

Lieutenant Ross was wishing his belt buckle was just a little bit sharper as he vainly struggled to free himself. From the sound of the explosions, the whole undersea base was about to blow up. The ship rocked again as more debris fell from the roof of the cavern.

"No good..." He told himself, "Guess this is it."

"Can I assist you Lieutenant?"

Ross froze. It didn't sound like Beatty. He turned his head. A robed green skinned figure stood in the doorway.

"You bet" Ross managed to call out.

The man stepped forward, producing a long knife from under his robes. "Your friend left in a hurry." the man said as he expertly sliced through the security restraining straps.

"No friend of mine," Ross sat up rubbing his arms and wrists, "We have to get out of here fast, the whole place is going up."

"Oh, there's no hurry Terrainean. I took the liberty of disconnecting the remaining explosives. Otherwise I'm afraid we would not be having this little talk."

"You are one of those undersea people aren't you?"

"Yes, I am one of those undersea people. And from your uniform I would say that you are one of those 'spacemen', correct?"

"Yeah," Ross said as he got a little unsteadily to his feet, "Space Lieutenant Ross, World Space Patrol at your service. But what are you doing here? Not that I'm complaining."

"Oh, I was just passing by and was curious about this undersea installation. It's all wired up for self-destruction."

"Can't help you there friend. All I know is that the admiral brought me here at gunpoint and then tried to blow me to bits."

"Yes, I observed your Admiral Beatty. He left in something of a hurry in one of the Piranha craft..."

"Piranha?"

"Your, ahem, the World Navy's high speed prototype submarines. Eight others left a few hours ago. What is their plan Lieutenant?"

Ross was starting to feel more than a little uneasy about his new companion. For one thing, the man was still holding his knife.

"I don't know yet, but I guess it's my job to find out, otherwise my boss is gonna feed me to the space-sharks! Will you help me?"

X2-Zero considered the situation thoughtfully, "Yes... Yes I believe we may help each other... We seem to find ourselves in very similar positions..."

To Ross's relief, the man put his knife away.

Ross led the way down Junior's boarding ramp. "So, what do you know about these Piranha subs?"

"High speed, two person prototypes. Prone to explode after thirty marine minutes or so if they maintain rate six."

"Not a lot of use then."

X2-Zero shook his head, "another failed Terrainean project."

From the way he spoke the word 'Terrainean', Ross got the strong impression that his rescuer was not a big admirer of humans. Right now, Ross was not a big fan of Admiral Beatty. What had the man been up to? Aside from attempted murder that is.

Ross could see that water was still pouring into the cavern and it was now almost up to waist height.

Telling X2-Zero to wait for him he ran back up the boarding ramp and quickly donned a WSP wet suit and aqualung.

Hoping his coma ray gun was water proof Ross hurried back down the ramp to join his rescuer

The sea water was now at chest level as Ross closed Fireball Junior's boarding ramp and then half swam over to the control room where X2-Zero was already looking over what remained of the control panels.

They continued to short circuit and burst into flames but the ever rising water was now dousing the inferno.

The two men did not touch the instrument panels for fear of electrocution but X2-Zero thought he recognized the function of one high level monitor that was still operating above the water level.

"This screen is recording a countdown if I am not mistaken. You Terraineans know that land mass shown beneath the countdown as Australia" said X2-Zero ominously.

"What are you suggesting?" asked Ross

“When I found this under sea base I also found missile silos nearby” said the Surface Agent.

Ross looked over to the far wall of the now nearly flooded control room and saw a panoramic window looking out over a hangar area where what appeared to be a dozen Titan Terror Fish were birthed.

X2-Zero swam over to the window and looked down in astonishment.

He could not believe his eyes

Titan would not be working with the Terraineans - or would he?

X2-Zero suddenly realized there was something odd about the Mechanical Fish he was looking at. Then it struck him like a hammer blow. They were World Navy Piranha two man submarines camouflaged to look like Titan's Terror Fish.

Someone must be trying to blame Titan for the pending missile attack on...on where?? The monitor suggested Australia.

It was the nearest major land mass. Someone was trying to start a war between the undersea races and the Terrainians.

The Surface Agent was at a loss to know what to do next. He began to panic.

Lieutenant Ross swam over to X2-Zero.

He could no longer speak to the fish man as the control room was by now completely flooded.

Ross grabbed the Surface Agent's arm and pointed towards the overhead monitor showing the countdown and then swam back towards the cavern where Fireball Junior sat waiting for him.

He turned and gestured for X2-Zero to follow him as he left the control room and headed for his ship.

X2-Zero joined Ross in Junior's rear airlock.

Minutes later both men were in the control cabin still dripping and leaving pools of water everywhere.

“We’ve got to blast our way out of here.” said Ross as he sat down in the pilot’s seat and powered up Fireball Junior’s motors

Junior rose from the cavern floor and turned to face the wrecked entrance doors.

Hoping that he could blow the doors clear without collapsing the entire cavern Ross fired two nose cone missiles.

The cavern shook with violent underwater explosions as Ross operated Junior’s boosters and the WSP craft shot out into the open ocean miraculously still in one piece.

X2-Zero sat in the co-pilot’s chair with a terrified look upon his green face

“Show me where those missile silos are” said Ross with a determined look upon his face. “We’ve gotta stop the missiles being launched”

“If you will allow me to swim back to my craft then you can follow me to the missile silos,” said X2-Zero.

“Just point me in the right direction” said Ross “We don’t know how much time we’ve got”

“My craft is armed. I can help you destroy the silos,” insisted the Surface Agent.

Ross accepted the logic in X2-Zero’s argument realizing he could only use nose cone missiles while under water — and he only had four remaining in Fireball Junior’s arms magazine.

X2-Zero directed Ross to where he had left his small one man submarine resting on the seabed nearby.

The Surface Agent left XL7 Junior by the rear airlock and swam across to his craft.

Minutes later Ross was following X2-Zero's shark shaped submarine along the undersea canyon.

Less than half a mile from the base the canyon opened out into a circular plateau and Ross could see six missile silos on the seabed below...all with their blast doors open.

Ross quickly scanned the silos and detected six missiles armed with coralamic warheads.

Suddenly power levels began to rise and the missile in the nearest silo began to launch...

The missile left its silo on a tail of super-heated gases and gradually gained speed as it headed up towards the surface of the ocean on its mission of destruction.

Ross had no choice but to follow it. His only hope of destroying it was with interceptors once they broke the ocean's surface.

The coralamic missile shot up into the atmosphere with XL7 Junior close on its tail.

Once the missile had left the ocean depths it began to climb at ever increasing speed as it headed up towards the stratosphere before locking onto its pre-set Australian target.

Ross knew that his timing had to be perfect when he fired his interceptors at the missile. If he was too close he would be caught in the blast — and he wanted to destroy it as high in the stratosphere as possible to limit the effect of the nuclear fallout on the ocean below.

It was now or never. Ross could see the missile had reached its apogee. Two interceptor missiles shot away from Fireball Junior and found their target in a flash of deadly blinding energy on the edge of space.

The Space Lieutenant was sweating profusely as he threw XL7 Junior into a dive and headed back towards the undersea missile silos on the floor of the Pacific Ocean below. If only he could destroy the silos before any more missiles were launched.

Fireball Junior dived into the Pacific Ocean once more. Ross was beginning to feel more like an Aquanaut than an Astronaut as he powered his small craft back towards the missile silos. What could he do to stop the remaining missiles launching? If he fired his nose cone missiles at the silos would that stop them or create even more destruction than he was trying to prevent?

He soon arrived back at the plateau where the silos were located and could see X2-Zero's sub lying on the sea bed with its top hatch open.

He then spotted the Surface Agent swimming back towards his fish shaped craft with what looked like a large pair of heavy duty wire cutters held in his hands.

Ross scanned the silos with Junior's instruments and to his amazement found that power levels in all the silos was now at zero. The five remaining missiles were still in situ but now completely deactivated.

X2-Zero waived at Ross as he entered his craft and closed the hatch behind him.

Ross settled XL7 Junior down on the ocean floor next to the Surface Agent's sub. Suddenly the silence of the control cabin was broken by X2-Zero's voice coming loud and clear over the radio transceiver in the console beside his pilot seat.

"I have cut all of the intersite cables leading to the silos from the base" said the Surface Agent, sounding very pleased with himself. "No more power to launch the remaining missiles. I hope you destroyed the one that was launched?"

“Yes I did” said Ross “How did you find the cables? They would have been buried deep and shielded. My scanners would have had difficulty detecting them. And how do you know the frequency of my ship’s radio?”

“Do not assume my craft is inferior to yours Terrainean” snapped the Surface Agent. “Now that the danger is over I must leave you and report this incident to Titan at once”

“And I must return to Space City” said Ross into the transceiver. “Thank you for your help. What’s your name by the way?”

X2-Zero did not reply. His fish like craft was already moving away from the WSP ship with ever increasing speed and was soon out of site in the murky depths of the Pacific.

The XL7 skipper powered up Fireball Junior’s motors and headed for the surface on the first leg of his journey back home to Space City.

Had he got a story to tell General Zero.

