

Chapter 20

Baptism of Fire

Marina emerged from the undersea canyon in a state of exhaustion. She swam slowly over to some rocks by the canyon's edge, crawled between them, and lay down to rest. Where could she go? She was certain to be captured if she returned to Troy and the others. As she lay concealed in the rocks her mind went over the events in the cave. She was certain that whatever lurked there was controlling the Aquaphibians, and possibly her friends also.

Was it another Teufel? Or had Teufel too journeyed to this planet? She knew so little about Titan's strange ally. She knew that Titan had a deep respect for Teufel and seemed to regard the fish creature as a mentor.

Marina tried again to understand the thoughts that she'd felt in the cave. Embedded in the images there had been emotions and feelings. A bizarre mix of intense heat and then intense cold. A feeling of life and then a feeling of lifelessness. A feeling of something very cold, so cold it would cool the sun itself. Marina shivered. She had sensed a feeling of death mingled with satisfaction. A sense of great power; and great evil. Then there had been another feeling. A discord, something out of place... and then she'd seen her own image in the mind of the cave creature. She knew she meant more than an irritation to the telepath, she was a threat. That thought gave Marina new hope. There was something she could accomplish to challenge the creature's power; but what? She was alone on a world that was not her own, but she refused to feel despair and instead clung to hope.

Marina had to move on. She dared not rest any longer, pursuit could not be far behind. She slowly edged her way out of the craggy outcropping, but to her horror, came face to face with a huge grotesque fish.

Marina ducked back behind the rocks, and hid herself, hardly daring to breathe. Nothing happened. She could feel no telepathic probings. Cautiously, she peered out from her hiding place. This time she saw the fish for what it really was; one of Titan's Mechanical Fish, lying silently on the sea floor. She'd glimpsed it before from above when she'd followed the Aquaphibians. One of the viewing portal 'eyes' had been covered over with a shiny reflective material, evidently a hasty repair. Marina realized that this must be the very submarine that she and Doctor Venus had travelled in before they were captured. Perhaps Stingray was here too.

Marina began to search, keeping close to whatever cover she could find. She could see the huge alien submarine fleet sitting on the sea bed ahead of her. Then, to her immense relief, her eyes suddenly lit upon another familiar shape; she'd found Stingray!

Marina's spirits lifted as she swam towards the supersub. Stingray was in darkness and the hatch in the bow of the sub had been left open. There was no sign of life.

Marina quickly entered the WASP submarine and closed the hatch behind her. Within minutes she had passed through the airlock onto the lower deck and was climbing the companion ladder up to the control cabin. What next? She must get Stingray away from here. Her skills were limited, but she'd learned enough to get the sub underway — and if necessary she could fire its weapons.

Marina sat down at the controls and began powering up.

Suddenly she heard the outer hatch being opened again. She looked through the forward window and saw an Aquaphibian lowering itself into the supersub — she had been followed from the cave...

The airlock drained and the inner hatchway swung open. The Aquaphibian confidently entered Stingray with its rifle-like weapon held ready. The creature saw Marina looking down at it from the upper deck and realised

that she was unarmed. It contemptuously dropped its weapon near the hatchway and sprang up the companion ladder after her, a predatory gleam in its eyes...

The sleek silvery-blue luxury space yacht, Lady Anne, fired up its main engines and turned gracefully away from the now abandoned police cruiser and headed for interstellar space.

Admiral Beatty thoughtfully sipped a whisky and soda as he watched the police ship receding into the distance. As he relaxed in the comfortable lounge of the Lady Anne he felt much relieved to find he was among friends and heading swiftly out of the Solar System, rather than helping police with their enquiries.

A tall middle aged woman walked over and joined him beside the panoramic windows, "So Beatty old man, what's the situation?"

Beatty turned and shrugged, "Plan B I'm afraid Sam."

"I thought as much. Still, can't be helped. All for the good at the end of the day."

Beatty drained his glass, "Yes. All for the good."

"Is your man Bandranaik coming along with us?"

"No. I'm sure he would not approve."

"Too bad. I never did like him though. Weak."

"Oh, but he was very useful, up to a point."

"No world domination after all. Just planetary oblivion..."

"Just a minor setback. There's plenty more worlds out there to dominate, it'll just take a little longer."

"I've always admired your optimism. But what do you make of the Aquaphibian creatures Beatty? Can we really trust them?"

"As much as we can trust anyone. Besides, they hold all the cards right now."

"You brought our insurance policy I hope?"

Beatty nodded, "Jacob's got it all in safe keeping."

"I gather you were followed."

"Yes. It seems so. I thought he might be one of yours."

"No, I knew you would be coming here. Besides, off world is outside WIN jurisdiction. Have to play by the rules don't you know?"

Beatty nodded, "Seems he's just some cranky salesman who thinks he's being clever. I understand our host is having a word with him before he's disposed of."

"So when is the Great Finale? After we've left the stage I trust?"

"Very soon I understand. A matter of days, perhaps hours. Those space Aquaphibians have no patience, and are totally ruthless."

"And the Earth's leaders and their forces are all hopelessly confused and too wrapped up in their own petty internal affairs to notice."

"Yes, and I think we should all take full credit for that." said Beatty calling a steward over and ordering another drink

Aboard Swordfish, Fisher was adjusting his hydrophone headset, "Atlanta! I'm picking up something at very long range. Not Terror Fish... Sounds like seven... No, eight of them. Smaller than Terror Fish."

"Give me a bearing," Atlanta said, her throat dry. "We'll get a closer look."

“Bearing Green two six seven.” Fisher frowned, “They are coming from the wrong direction. Surely Titan would be coming from the North east, not the West.”

Atlanta tried to imagine what Troy would have done in this situation. “Red thirty degrees. Let’s go see for ourselves.”

Fisher wanted to say, “but...” He bit his lip instead. “Aye, aye sir, Red thirty.” Swordfish swung around onto her new heading.

“They are moving far too fast to be Terror Fish... Rate six.” said Fisher

Atlanta shrugged, “So maybe Titan has something else. Or maybe....”

“It’s not Titan.” they both finished.

“We are heading for reefs and shallow water. Think we can handle it?”

“I’d advise against it Skipper.”

“So would I. But we’re going to have to try anyway...”

Mason had brought the ‘other’ Smith to a palatial and very comfortable looking office. The walls were lined with awards and photographs and a few paintings. The largest painting, of a rather large man, hung on the wall behind a very similar looking large man seated behind a very large and expensive antique desk. The man gestured for Mason to leave and then nodded to Smith, he didn't smile. "Do come in. Please take a seat would you? I am most eager to meet you."

"The feeling is mutual," the salesman said cordially as he casually sat down in the chair opposite the man’s desk, setting his briefcase down beside him. "Mr. Jacob Richards isn't it? How's the media business? You own most of the Earth's media now I believe, don't you?"

"Oh, I'd rather you told me about your line of work Mr. Smith. The men who brought you aboard seem to think you are a toy salesman. Frankly, I doubt this."

"You mean those fake policemen?"

"Fake?"

"Real Martian police don't carry the military issue mark 5 ray guns, they still use the old mark 3s."

"How clever of you to notice. Some of my personal staff. I had to pick up a colleague quickly. You got in the way. The theatrical uniforms are very authentic but the guns had to be real, just in case. I own the cruiser. Genuine police surplus. Purchased. For film use..."

"I also noticed you have some other rather high profile guests aboard."

"Really? That's very observant of you for a toy salesman. A drink? A Marscini perhaps?"

Smith smiled, "Tea. Milk, no sugar."

"As you wish." Richards leaned forward and pressed a series of buttons at the side of his desk. "Venusian?"

The salesman nodded and as if by magic, a cup of Venusian tea appeared on a side table beside him.

"The Lady Anne is fully automated. Having servants around is so tiresome. Now, I believe you were going to tell me your real name and your real line of work."

The man produced a shield shaped plastic badge from his pocket and pinned it to his lapel, "I'm a Special Agent Mr. Richards. Code name: Twenty One."

"A cheap novelty toy badge. How amusing."

Twenty One quietly sipped his tea.

"I'm afraid my men had very little time to inquire about your real business out here. I, however, have plenty of time."

Twenty One looked up from his tea, raising his eyebrows, "All the time in the world?"

"Rather more than that I would say. Now, tell me, 'Agent Twenty One', why were you following my colleague?"

"Admiral Beatty? Well, for one thing, I wanted to find out who all his friends were."

"I see. And why pray tell would you want to know this?"

"Long story."

"We won't be disturbed. Go ahead."

"Well, Mr. Richards, have you ever been to a planet called Zofeit?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Well, I was there about ten years ago, as part of my job."

"Selling toys I suppose?"

"No. My company needed information. You see, despite our best efforts we were unable to sell them our toys. We wanted to establish one of our branch offices there."

"Really."

"We found out that the Zofeits were all essentially pacifists, which is why the majority of our toys were of no interest to them. More than that, they were regarded as repugnant."

"You have a point to make?"

"Yes. I discovered that their scientists were working on a revolutionary non-violent way of protecting their planet from attack. A ray that would neutralize atomic and nutomic power sources of any hostile ships."

"They told you that?"

"Let's just say that I found out. Unfortunately, it seems someone else also found out. The entire Zofeit people, bar a few, were wiped out by a race of Aquaphibians a couple of years ago."

"And?"

"And I believe the Aquaphibians have developed the ray far beyond the original intent."

"I see. Very impressive. You really are a secret agent. But you are far too late Twenty One. The die is cast, my inquisitive friend. The Earth, and the entire Solar System are about to feel the effects of the augmented Zofeit invention. With Earth out of the way, we are now simply travelling to join the new undisputed rulers of the Galaxy."

"Bearing gifts?"

"My, you have done your homework. Yes, we have all the blueprints for Earth's military hardware and other useful data. Useful to those with a thirst for conquest. And our Aquaphibian friends are very thirsty, very thirsty indeed." Richards pressed his intercom button, "Mason, come in here, would you."

Twenty One glanced down at his watch.

"What's the matter, Twenty One? Is it time for something?"

"Yes, I believe it is. High time."

There was a low buzzing sound from the ventilator grill in the wall.

Richards turned in annoyance, "Darned insects!"

Twenty One finished his tea, "Looks like a wasp to me."

Richards impatiently jabbed at the intercom again as the buzzing behind him grew louder, "Mason! Get in here man!"

The special agent smiled as he set down his cup and saucer, "Thanks for the tea Mr. Richards."

Richards didn't answer. He was slumped, unmoving, across his desk.

Tapping the centre of his shield shaped badge Twenty One glanced expectantly around the office. A few seconds later a wasp-like tiny robot insect flew onto his lapel and crawled behind the badge.

Twenty One walked back to the door which silently slid open at his approach. In the short outer hallway he took a moment to kneel down beside the prone form of Mason. After removing the ray gun from the man's holster and pocketing it, Twenty One carried the unconscious man back into the office, and deposited him on to a vacant chair.

Satisfied that the two men were going to be out for some time, the agent now turned his attention to the large portrait of Jacob Richards that hung on the wall behind the desk.

Deep under the alien sea, Colonel Zodiac piloted Fireball Junior along the course that Professor Matic had given him. As he drew nearer to his destination he realized they'd been mistaken. This was no underwater city. There, stretching out across the seabed, was a massive fleet of spacecraft; not unlike the space-submarines that he'd pursued, but much, much larger.

Steve estimated there must be at least a hundred craft. His heart missed a beat. This must be the super-weapon — the fleet of ships that could extinguish stars. He wondered whether to risk sending a signal to Matt and Ninety, have them come in and destroy the subs. He decided he'd likely cause the aliens to launch their armada, and he doubted that the two Fireballs would stand a chance against them.

Cautiously skirting Fireball Junior around the assemblage of behemoths, Steve gathered all the data that he could.

He was surprised to suddenly see the distinctive silver and blue shape of the WASP submarine Stingray. Were any WASP crew still aboard? One good way to find out. Steve activated Fireball Junior's neutroni radio, setting it for short range UHF. No sense in telling too many folks he'd arrived. He kept one finger on the nosecone missile firing button — just in case. "World Space Patrol vessel Fireball XL5 to Stingray. Come in Stingray. Over..."

Steve waited, adjusting his display screen to get a better look at the WASP vessel. He could see signs of movement inside, friend or foe? "Fireball Junior to Stingray... Come in Stingray. Over"

Within the supersub the Aquaphibian's head jerked around when it heard Steve Zodiac's voice on the speakers behind it.

Marina took advantage of the unexpected distraction, and lashing out with her right foot, she kicked the creature over the railing sending it crashing heavily onto the deck below.

She hurriedly activated Stingray's radio and began tapping her fingernails sharply against the microphone. She had to stop after only a few seconds as she heard the Aquaphibian beginning to stir down below. Marina went back to the ladder leading to the lower deck and peered down. The Aquaphibian lay dazed but still very much alive at the foot of the ladder. Marina could see the creature's rifle still lying by the airlock hatchway. When she was half way down the companion ladder, she leapt over the Aquaphibian, in an attempt to reach the weapon before the alien could recover. The creature managed to grab her ankle and she crashed sprawling to the deck. Marina desperately tried to pull herself free.

As she struggled with the Aquaphibian, Marina was vaguely aware of the voice on the radio again, "Stingray? Can you respond?"

Another scaly hand grabbed at Marina's long hair, turning her over on to her back as the girl kicked out in desperation. She could taste the creature's foul breath as it casually inspected its struggling prey. It was incredibly

strong and its claws were as sharp as razors. The Aquaphibian gripped Marina by the throat, lifting her from the deck. Her senses reeled as she was slammed hard against the bulkhead. As the vice-like grip slowly tightened she felt a numbing blackness overwhelming her.

Lieutenant Fisher was feeling more than a little nervous as he monitored the soundscape ahead of Swordfish. He'd wanted action for sure, but he'd hardly gotten used to being aboard Swordfish and now they were in action for the first and possibly last time. Captain Tempest and Phones had often talked about their battles with Titan's mechanical fish, but Stingray hadn't taken on so many of them at one time. He cast a worried glance towards Atlanta Shore, his skipper, who'd never commanded a sub in battle before.

Atlanta's eyes were fixed on the controls. She was deep in her own thoughts. Would her father be proud of what she did today? Would she ever see him again? If only Troy was... was... She shook her head, "No time for any of that!" she told herself firmly.

"Atlanta!" Fisher exclaimed urgently, "The fish, they're starting to split up, fanning out."

"This is it then. They are preparing to attack. Seal water tight doors. Prepare sting missiles, we are going to need all of them."

Atlanta allowed herself one last worried thought, was Fisher up to this? Come to that, was she? She'd soon find out...

"Aye aye skipper. Closing watertight doors... Preparing sting missiles."

Atlanta adjusted the SoundScan screen. The local area map was replaced with a simplified visual of what Fisher was picking up on his hydrophones. A fuzzy dot moved slowly but steadily down the screen.

"That must be the nearest of them. Red one four."

"Red one four."

Swordfish arced gracefully around to her new heading.

Fisher was feeling calm now. "Ten thousand yards... Nine thousand ...There it is Atlanta!"

"I don't get this. It's ignoring us."

"You suppose we have to attract its attention?"

"Stand by to fire sting missile 1. We mustn't miss."

"One thousand yards... nine hundred yards..."

"Hold it!" Atlanta said urgently, "that's no terror fish... Looks more like one of those little World Navy subs."

"You're right Atlanta. It's a navy Piranha. That crazy fish camouflage had me fooled. What do we do now Skipper?"

"Slow to cruising speed and maintain our distance. I don't know what to make of this."

"Do you suppose the World Navy got here in time after all?"

"Sure looks like it. We'll have to break radio silence. See if you can contact that sub, but use very low power. We don't want to alert the enemy."

"Aye Skipper."

Deep under the waters of the alien ocean, Fireball Junior rested silently on the seabed. Directly ahead, about a hundred yards away, lay the sleek WASP submarine Stingray.

Colonel Zodiac turned to his co-pilot, "Guard Fireball Junior, Robert."

The robot repeated his orders in a monotone electronic voice as Steve hurried from the control cabin. The response from Stingray had been short but clear. Someone had tapped out an SOS. There were people in trouble over there, possibly injured and they probably needed help fast.

As Steve made his way to the equipment lockers in the jetmobile bay, he considered the possibility of a trap, but with all those hostile ships out there, a deception seemed unlikely. They could have simply blasted him out of the water.

Hastily Steve stripped off his uniform and pulled on his distinctive red and silver WSP wetsuit bearing the 'XL5' emblem. He buckled on a belt with a holstered ray gun and attached a first aid kit. Then, grabbing a face-mask, air tank and swim fins he stepped into the small airlock at the rear of the ship. The door hissed closed behind him and immediately water began to pour into the chamber. Steve put on the rest of his underwater gear as the airlock rapidly filled.

Seconds later the outer hatch opened automatically, and Steve pushed himself free of Junior and began swimming towards Stingray. He could see no signs of life as he approached the submarine, though light gleamed steadily from the windows.

All Steve's senses were alert as he opened Stingray's bow hatch and entered the airlock. Closing the outer door above him, he began draining the chamber, and hurriedly pulled off his face-mask, air tank and fins.

Steve drew his ray gun and stepped cautiously out of the airlock onto the sub's lower deck.

He was immediately confronted by the sight of the grotesque, inert bulk of an Aquaphibian; it lay sprawled face down across another body. There was no sign of movement. The smoking hole in the Aquaphibian's green-scaled back indicated that the creature had very recently died.

Crouching down, Steve carefully rolled the body aside — to reveal the still form of a beautiful young woman. Her eyes were closed and she didn't seem to be breathing. The light grey jump-suit she wore was badly torn, exposing angry red marks on her skin. Clapsed tightly in her left hand was an Aquaphibian laser rifle.

Steve briefly glanced over at the body of the dead Aquaphibian; clearly the fatal shot had entered through its chest. Turning back to the girl, the Colonel's attention was suddenly drawn to her feet... her toes were webbed... Realization dawned. He was looking at the Pacifican princess, Marina. The member of Stingray's crew, who'd been a slave of Titan, until her rescue only a year ago.

Very gently, Steve lifted Marina's left hand, and checked for a pulse. He was relieved to find that she was alive, though her pulse rate seemed very slow. Was that good or bad for a Pacifican? He carefully began prizing the alien weapon from her rigid fingers.

Reluctantly leaving Marina on the lower deck, Steve made a quick search of the rest of the submarine. He found no other crew members — or Aquaphibians.

Steve holstered his ray gun and hurried back to Marina.

"Marina," he called gently as he knelt on the deck beside her, "can you hear me?"

There was no response. The girl's pulse rate was unchanged, and there was still no sign of breathing... Did she breathe? Did she have lungs like a human?

Steve considered using the drugs that he had brought in his first aid kit, but he dared not give her anything that might harm her strange physiology. He decided he shouldn't attempt to stimulate her breathing for the same reason.

Quickly stepping back into the open airlock, Steve scooped up some of the remaining sea-water in his face-mask. Then, sitting on the deck beside Marina, he let the water gently splash over the girl's face and body, hoping that it might revive her.

Somewhere in the dark depths of Marina's subconscious, instincts began to stir in response to the sensations of the cold salt water splashing over her body. Her skin was gratefully absorbing the water, rapidly extracting the precious oxygen. Part of the Pacifican girl's mind was now drifting up to a more conscious level. She was experiencing pleasure.

Through half closed eyes, Marina was now watching a handsome fair haired man, as he leaned over her, splashing water onto her face and body. She blinked. Was this a dream? She closed her eyes again, her mind drifting blissfully. More water caressed her. It felt so sensuous.

Marina opened her eyes wide. The man smiled down at her and made sounds with his mouth. The sounds meant nothing, though they were soothing, almost musical. Was this her Master? She could not remember, but felt that he must be. She looked up into the man's kind, smiling eyes, but was surprised to find that she could not feel his mind.

Abruptly, the man stopped splashing the cool water over her.

Why? Had she displeased him? Marina stretched her body enticingly and smiled up at her suitor, trying to encourage him to resume his attentions, but he simply returned her smile and continued to sing his strange song.

As Marina experienced a feeling of frustration and rejection, the emotions welling up inside caused her mind to begin to clear. She suddenly felt pain and fear.

The creature was trying to make her cry out — she could feel its mind — but she could not cry out; she had no voice. The creature grew angry, impatient to hear her screams. The rifle... Where was it? She convulsed, her head tossing from side to side.

Aboard the space yacht, Lady Ann, the navigator was worriedly voicing his concerns, "But there's nothing out there Frank. This course is taking us way

out of the interstellar shipping lanes and into uncharted space. Shouldn't we check with Mr. Richards?"

The pilot shook his head, "No chance. You know how the boss gets all riled up if you ask him questions. He gave us this course and we follow it. Not our job to plan his routes."

The navigator sighed, "Ours not to reason why..."

"Yours but to do and die?" a voice said as the door slid open behind them.

"What?!"

The pilot turned in his seat and looked at Twenty One sternly,

"Sir, I'm sorry but I must ask you to leave the flight deck."

Twenty One stepped back half a pace and held up a hand. He smiled, "Just running an errand for Mr. Richards. He wanted me to check the course for him."

"Why didn't he just call on...? Oh never mind. Whatever. Tell Mr. Richards we're on the course he gave us, he needn't worry."

Twenty One pulled out a small notebook, "And that would be?"

"Five one six zero white."

"Spot on. Sorry to have troubled you."

"No worries. You one of the guests?"

"Yes, just got aboard," the agent said as he stared around at the array of control panels in apparent bewilderment.

"Oh yeah. Have a nice trip, it's gonna be a long one. Now if you don't mind we have work to do up here flying this ship."

"Surely." the visitor said as he returned the notebook to his pocket. "Looks like a very complicated business."

The man headed back into the ship, "Be seeing you."

"Happy now?" the pilot asked once the door had closed.

"Yeah, I suppose so." The navigator frowned, "Frank, do you hear a sort of... Buzzing noise?"

Marina sat up... Where was she? A Terrainean was holding her gently in his arms. "Don't worry," the man was saying, "I'm Colonel Steve Zodiac — World Space Patrol."

Marina nodded numbly. She could see the body of the dead Aquaphibian lying only a few feet away.

"It's dead," the Colonel told her, "and there's no-one else aboard."

The man's voice seemed to be coming from far away, "Are you okay?"

Marina wasn't sure. As she sat on the deck her fingers gingerly probed for damage, tracing the ugly scratches and ripped clothing they encountered. She tried to stand, and the Colonel gently helped her to her feet. He reminded her of someone. Looking up into his face, she realised that this Space Patrol Colonel was a dead ringer for the heart-throb movie star, Johnny Swoonara. As the Colonel's strong arms effortlessly lifted her, she noted that unlike Swoonara, this man's well developed muscles and broad shoulders were real, and he stood tall even in his bare feet. Leaning in his arms Marina felt suddenly aware of what an awful mess she must look, her clothes torn, her hair dishevelled.

Marina put all such thoughts aside as she remembered Troy and the others. She had to make this Colonel Zodiac understand. Pointing to her mouth she shook her head emphatically.

“You’re Marina, aren’t you? The princess from under the sea — and you can’t talk. Listen, I have my spaceship nearby. We can get back over to it.” said Steve

Marina shook her head again, and pointed to the upper deck. With the Colonel’s help she made her way to the companion ladder. She began to climb, a little unsteadily, with Steve close behind her in case she lost her footing.

Once they were on the upper deck, Marina beckoned Steve to follow her to the relaxation bay. Picking up a small control pad from the table, Marina motioned Steve to look at a display screen mounted on the bulkhead, as she began pressing buttons on the hand-held device. Words started to appear on the screen.

“This interface translates my written language into English. Where are we?”

“We are on an uncharted planet many light years from our Solar System” said Steve

“I knew we were no longer on Earth” typed Marina “The water is so different here”

Steve nodded “What happened to the rest of the Stingray crew?”

“Captured. Captain Tempest and Lieutenant Sheridan are prisoners of Aquaphibians. I escaped. They need our help.”

Steve found it hard to ask his next question.

“Marina, have you seen Doctor Venus. The WSP Doctor? She was kidnapped.”

Marina nodded, keying in more words, “The Doctor is with the Stingray crew.” Seeing the anxious expression on Steve’s face, Marina added, “She is well. All are well but behave strangely, as if hypnotized.”

“Where are they being held?”

“On an island approximately twenty miles from here. I can take you there.”

“Can you pilot Stingray?”

“Yes, in a primitive fashion.”

“Marina, we’ll find the others, but first I have to destroy those space subs out there. They are preparing to wipe out life on Earth by tampering with the Sun.”

Marina nodded, remembering the thoughts that she’d experienced at the cave.

“Do you have magnetic mines aboard Stingray?”

Marina thought for a moment, “Yes. There should be twelve MkIV hydromic bombs. Not enough.”

“I have warheads aboard my ship too. We can at least reduce the odds.”

Marina typed, “I will help you.” Noticing Steve’s expression, she quickly added, “I insist Colonel — I move quickly underwater. I believe we have only a short time.”

Steve had to admit he could do with the help. “Okay Marina. Let’s get started... Oh... and please call me ‘Steve’.”

"I don't get it Atlanta. No response... Wait... They're slowing..."

“Odd,” Atlanta said as she stared out at the navy sub, “Maybe they heard but can't transmit.”

Fisher suddenly clutched at his headphones, "Evasive Skipper!"

Atlanta responded instantly, "Red ninety! Rate two!"

Swordfish surged forward and to port as a torpedo shot from the front of the other sub and missed them — but not by much.

"Stand by to return fire! Prepare stings one and two."

"Stings one and two. Ready."

"They started this... Green one three five."

As Swordfish swung around to face its attacker Fisher called out a warning, "Atlanta, the other subs, they're turning, starting to head this way!"

"Fire sting one."

Fisher pressed the firing stud and sent a sting missile streaking towards its target, "Sting one away."

Seconds later the missile tore the navy submarine apart in a cloud of bubbling water.

Atlanta glanced apprehensively at the video display as seven ominous blue dots began to converge on their position. "We'd better keep low, make use of cover... it's going to be seven against one now."

"Make that eight skipper," Fisher reported, "Another craft moving in astern, range fifteen thousand yards."

Atlanta adjusted the sonar screen to a wider range. "I see it. Looks like we are well and truly on the menu! Prepare sting three."

Fisher selected the missile, "Sting three ready. Say, that eighth craft is on the surface... Pretty big by the sound of it. Must be a ship of some kind."

"But all the shipping was diverted... Wasn't it? We'll have to go up to SVS depth and take a look. Blow one, three, five and seven."

As Swordfish began heading upwards in a tight spiral, Atlanta kept a close eye on the Piranha subs. They were slowing now. They seem to be waiting for something...

Atlanta adjusted the focus on the Surface Video Scanner, "I see it... Looks like an ocean liner. Heading this way."

“The Navy subs are on the move again Skipper” called Fisher as he listened intently to the soundings being picked up by his hydrophones. “They’re rising towards the surface in the path of the ocean liner. They seem to be moving into an attack formation.”

“Warn that ship off. Tell them to close all water tight doors,” Atlanta ordered.

Aboard the cruise liner ‘Serenity’ the radio operator was shaking his head as he spoke on the video link, “Sorry Captain, I’ve stripped the radio down, switched out the parts, checked everything and it’s still not sending or receiving. It should be, but it isn’t.”

Upon the bridge the captain sighed with exasperation, “So, we can’t call up the port authority, or anyone else for that matter.”

“I can’t explain it. It’s as if there’s nobody out there sir.”

“It’s strange, but it actually looks that way. There are no other vessels out here, but there was a lot of aircraft activity earlier. Not to worry Ian. We’ll be arriving in Sydney in about half an hour. It’s probably just those damned World Navy pilots playing around with their jamming equipment. Wargames I expect.”

“Mind if I come up on deck Captain? I’d like to see if I can spot one of those big fish everyone is talking about.”

“Why not? Better have Harry nursemaid the radio, just in case we get a call.”

“Have you seen the fish Captain?”

“No, probably dolphins, but it sounds like the passengers seem to find them exciting for some reason. Hear them shouting?”

The Captain flicked off the intercom and absently gazed out to sea to look where many of the passengers were pointing.

“What on Earth!”

His hand darted back to the intercom, “Engine room full reverse! Emergency!”

As the huge liner began to slow, the Captain stared in disbelief as two distinctive sinister trails of foam and bubbles headed straight towards his ship.

Travelling at six hundred knots, several hundred feet beneath the ocean, Swordfish was rapidly closing the distance to the Serenity.

“Oh my God!” Fisher exclaimed when he heard the torpedoes on his hydrophones, “They’re opening fire on the liner!”

“Target those two nearest subs... Fire stings two and three.” ordered Atlanta
Sting missiles shot upwards from Swordfish’s port and starboard tubes and found their targets in two bubbling explosions of superheated water — the shock waves of which miraculously deflected the torpedoes from their target.

Atlanta turned anxiously to Fisher, “How’s that liner?”

“Okay so far, but the other subs are closing in on her.”

“We’ll surface. Blow all tanks. Slow to cruising speed. Green One Five. We’ll have to get between that ship and the attackers or we’ll risk hitting it.”

Many of the Serenity’s passengers were crowded along the ship’s rails, staring in disbelief at all the strange fish like craft heading towards them.

Suddenly there was a bright flash followed by a deafening explosion.

“Hey, look Brenda!” called one of the passengers to his wife “Those fish things are blowing themselves up!”

Brenda was rubbing her eyes, “But what’s happening? Are we being attacked?”

“I doubt it. Just fake torpedoes and dummy fish that blow up. Some kind of military stunt I expect.” said her husband hopefully. “Might even be holograms. Nothing to worry about. I’ll go get my camera!”

A loud chime announced that the ship’s public address system had been switched on.

“Attention. Attention. This is the Captain speaking. Please remain calm. We are going to go over the lifeboat drills you practiced earlier. Please treat this as if it were a real attack.”

“See Brenda, I told you so. Let’s go play abandon ship. Always wanted to do that.”

Up on the bridge the Captain switched off his microphone and wiped his brow as he turned to face his senior officers.

“But it is a real attack Captain... Isn’t it?”

“Gentlemen, we will treat this as if it were a real attack. Those are my orders. Get to it, and see that there’s no panic!”

As Swordfish surfaced, two of the World Navy subs pulled back from their attack on the liner and swung around to face their new target.

“On my mark,” Atlanta told Fisher, hoping that she sounded calmer than she felt, “Red three zero. Wait for them to fire...”

“Now!” Atlanta shouted as the two Navy subs fired torpedoes.

Swordfish turned sharply to starboard.

There was a loud explosion and Swordfish juddered.

“We’re hit!” Atlanta cursed, “Rear hydroplanes damaged. Red one sixty. Let’s get them in our sights!”

Swordfish swung around as the two enemy subs sped past her. Now the liner was behind them and they had two targets side-on.

Sting missiles blew them out of the water in blinding flashes of energy before they could open fire on the WASP supersub a second time.

“Boy!” Fisher gasped, “What are they packing into sting missiles these days?”

Atlanta was thinking fast, “We have to circle around the ship, protect its starboard side. They’re still a sitting target for those fake mechanical fish.”

As they rounded the stern of the Serenity, two more of the disguised Navy Piranha mini subs broke off their attack on the ocean liner and turned towards Swordfish.

“Seems we’re now the target of choice,” Atlanta observed grimly, “That’s good. I think... Green one nine, rate one”

The two Piranhas wasted no time and fired torpedoes at Swordfish.

“Dive, dive, dive. Flood Q,” ordered Atlanta as she took Swordfish down into a dive with the torpedoes following close behind.

“It’s no good...We’re too sluggish!” Fisher shouted over the whine of the engines, “can’t steepen the dive! Impact in five seconds.”

Atlanta threw the supersub into a sudden u turn at the last second and turned Swordfish back towards the surface.

The two torpedoes slammed into the sea bed and exploded, sending up a shower of rock fragments and tossing Swordfish on to her side.

“We’re hit!” Atlanta cried out as they struggled to bring the sub back onto an even keel. Red lights were flashing on the control console and she quickly made some checks. “Ballast tank three inoperable. Otherwise we’re okay.”

“Skipper! Those two fish are coming down after us. Bearing...”

“I see them. Red twenty! Fire Sting Missiles six and seven,” ordered Atlanta, “We’re not giving those Navy traitors another chance to fire at us”

A few moments later there was only one World Navy Piranha sub left. Its sister vessels destroyed, it broke off its attack on the ocean liner and dived, heading away from Swordfish at rate six.

“We’ve got to capture that sub,” called Atlanta as she pulled Swordfish around to follow the Piranha, “Got to find out who’s really behind this attack.”

As the minutes went by, the damaged Swordfish fell more and more behind as it struggled to maintain rate six.

“She’s still gaining on us Skipper” called Fisher as Atlanta tried to coax more speed out of Swordfish’s Drumman-WASP Hydrojet Turbine.

The chase seemed all but lost as Fisher heard the sonar returns from the Piranha grow steadily fainter.

“We’re losing them Skipper,” he reported resignedly, “At this range it’s getting hard to pinpoint their position accurately.”

“Give it your best, we have to try to nail that sub.”

“Their motors are starting to sound really rough... Hey! They’re slowing!” called a surprised Fisher.

“We’re starting to catch them up!” Atlanta said excitedly, “Stand by... They must be turning to attack!”

“No Atlanta,” Fisher said as he concentrated on the sounds from his hydrophones, “It sounded like their power units just blew... They’ve lost all motive power.”

Ahead of them, the Piranha sub abruptly lost speed and began a slow circling dive to the sea bed below.

Fisher monitored the craft’s descent on his headphones as Swordfish drew rapidly nearer.

“She’s down Skipper, and there’s no sounds from the engines.”

“I see her... She’s lying on her port side. Let’s get down there.”

Atlanta set Swordfish down on the seabed, close to the crashed submarine.

“Now we’ll get some answers.”

Lieutenant Fisher quickly donned his wetsuit and within a few minutes he was setting off with a seabug to get over to the stricken sub. He tested his radio as he moved away from Swordfish, “Atlanta, are you receiving me okay?”

Atlanta replied immediately, “Loud and clear, John. Still nothing from the Piranha.”

Fisher was soon travelling over the starboard side of the small submarine.

“It doesn’t look too damaged. There should be survivors... I’m setting the seabug down and then I’m going over to the viewports to take a look inside.”

Cautiously Fisher swam over to the sub. Clinging to the hull, he peered into the cockpit area. “Atlanta! There’s nobody inside!”

“But they can’t have gotten out, we’d have seen them. What can you see in there?”

“There are no obvious controls, no seats, just racks of electronic equipment... Atlanta, I think this thing must be fully automated.”

"We'll take it back to the WASP base in Brisbane for the scientists to examine. I'll get suited up and bring out a tow line."

"Hold it Atlanta! There's something else in those racks... High explosives — and they're wired in!"

Admiral Beatty almost spilled his drink when Twenty One, his chrome coloured briefcase in hand, strolled confidently into the lounge of the Lady Anne.

Beatty's drinking companion smiled, "Well if it isn't agent Twenty One, of the Universal Secret Service."

Twenty one nodded, "In person, Ms. Fairfax, of the World Intelligence Network."

"I must say I'm surprised. So you are in on this deal too?" said WIN Chief Samantha Fairfax

Twenty One walked over to the stairs and leaned casually on the hand rail. "Not exactly..."

Beatty glared, "Samantha this is the man who tailed me!"

"What's your game Twenty One?" Fairfax demanded.

"My game? I'm here to foil your dastardly plot of course."

All eyes turned to the door as two of the fake policemen suddenly burst into the room, ray guns drawn, "Okay wise guy, drop that case."

Fairfax shouted a warning, "Don't fire those guns in here you fools!"

"It's getting rather stuffy in here don't you think?" Twenty One said conversationally, "Anyone mind if I open a window or two?" Suddenly hurling his case at the two guards he pulled Mason's ray gun from his pocket and blasted out the window panels.

The shriek of an alarm siren was abruptly drowned out by the sound of shrieks of a different kind and the sound of rapidly escaping air and breaking glass.

Twenty One let the ray gun spin from his hand as he clung desperately to the stair rail, his legs flailing, as everything not secured in place rushed through the shattered windows and out into space.

After what seemed like an eternity, Twenty One's numb fingers lost their grip and he fell silently to the deck. It was now very quiet in the empty lounge. There was no sound at all, there was no air at all.

Very cautiously Lieutenant Fisher was examining the outer hatch to the Piranha submarine. "Sealed and wired for detonation... I'll have to try getting in through the torpedo tube instead. I'll get some tools from the seabug."

Atlanta Shore was watching anxiously from the controls of Swordfish, "No John," she said over the radio, "It's too risky. I want you to return to Swordfish. We'll have Captain Jordan get a WASP bomb disposal team down here..."

"Listen Atlanta, I've trained in bomb disposal. If this thing blows up we'll have no evidence that it was a Navy sub. This was a false flag attack for sure. This sub might be just the thing to get your father off the hook and out of that prison."

Reluctantly Atlanta had to agree. She climbed out of her seat, "Okay John, I'll get my wetsuit and come over to help."

"Much appreciated Skipper," Fisher responded as he selected a toolkit from his seabug and secured it around his waist.

Soon Fisher was crawling into the narrow confines of the torpedo tube, “Here’s hoping that tube isn’t loaded.”

Atlanta had already suited up and was about to enter Swordfish’s forward airlock when Fisher radioed again. “Atlanta, I think you’d better get Swordfish clear.”

“She should be safe enough where she is...”

“No, she won’t be. I’ve located the explosive. At first I thought there wasn’t any, just the wiring and the detonators. Then I found something very small and very nasty. I’ve opened up the explosive pack Atlanta. It’s Vesuvium 9.”

“It can’t be... Can it?”

Over in the Piranha sub, Fisher had taken off his face-mask and placed it beside him on a console so that he could still use the radio. “I’m no expert in planetary demolition but I’m pretty sure of what I’ve got here.”

“How much Vesuvium?” asked Atlanta.

Lieutenant Fisher was carefully taking apart an unimpressive looking grey box, “Oh, only a few drops, but more than enough to completely disintegrate every molecule of this submarine and anything within maybe a half mile of it, give or take a quarter mile.”

“Get clear John. That’s a direct order!”

Fisher continued to work calmly and steadily, almost grateful of the distraction of the conversation. “Sorry Skipper, no can do. I’m afraid I had to make a bit of a mess of the torpedo bay when I entered. I’m trapped here for now. The cabin is flooding. If the cold sea-water hits the explosive or even the detonators...”

“John! I can’t leave you there.”

“If we both get ourselves killed there’ll be nobody to file a report on what’s happened out here. Don’t worry, I’m not intending to die a hero Atlanta. I want to be around to collect my medals in person.”

As he worked, it seemed to Fisher that Atlanta’s voice was coming from somewhere very distant.

“Make sure you do Lieutenant, I’m not collecting them for you. Don’t go away... I’ll be back to pick you up. Good luck John...”

“P.W.O.R.”

Lieutenant Fisher didn’t spare a glance towards Swordfish as the sub left the seabed and headed swiftly away. He shrugged off his air-tanks and set them down carefully on the deck beside him. He was intent on his work. His life depended on him getting this right. “Now, how do I disconnect the detonators without disturbing the Vesuvium 9?”

The Lady Anne was cruising at high velocity as it moved out of the Solar System and headed into deep space. Twenty One swung himself out of the shattered lounge window, carefully planting both feet onto the outer hull as he did so. Pausing for a moment, he took another oxygen pill. Then he began cautiously moving along the ship's hull, his shoes' magnetic soles gripping to the maintenance walkway with each step. Despite the high speed of the yacht, there was no sensation of movement, everything seemed eerily still. Twenty One was acutely aware that the apparent stillness would come to an abrupt and deadly end if the ship were to change its velocity. He checked his watch and calculated that he had less than twenty minutes or so before the ship's video monitoring systems could be repaired. He would have to work fast.

Lieutenant Fisher considered his options. If he couldn't disconnect the detonators from the Vesuvium cylinder it would explode, in about twenty minutes. If the water level rose by another four feet, the Vesuvium would explode. If he tried to open the upper hatch the explosive charges would detonate the Vesuvium. If he disconnected the detonators it was a fair guess the Vesuvium would explode.

He really didn't want to be anywhere near the explosion if it happened and he was pretty sure it was going to happen.

He looked back at the torpedo tube. There was one torpedo left. Fisher began unscrewing the water-tight compartment that contained the guidance system. If he could rip out the electronics and pack the Vesuvium in its place he had a slim chance. He hoped his hands wouldn't shake.

