

Chapter 21

Awakening

Jacob Richards slowly began to wake up. A siren was blaring out over the wall speakers. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes as he tried to think. He could see Mason, slumped in the chair opposite, unconscious.

Richards suddenly leapt to his feet and stared around the room, "Smith! Where is he?"

Mason stirred and opened his eyes, "The alarm, we must have hit something!"

Richards turned off the wall speakers and pressed an intercom button, "Archer! What the blazes is happening?"

The intercom remained silent.

"Maybe the flight deck was hit?"

Richards impatiently stabbed at a few more buttons, "Completely dead! Get out there and find out what's going on! And get yourself another gun, man! That 'Smith' of yours is some kind of spy. He's up to mischief. Eliminate him on sight!"

"Yes sir."

"Wait. If we've taken damage we might have lost air." Richards opened a desk drawer and took out a small pill box, "We'd better take some of these... These..."

"Chocolate drops?" Mason suggested as he eyed the contents of the box.

At rate five, Swordfish was speeding back to the liner's last plotted position. Atlanta forced herself to concentrate on the job at hand. She'd always wondered how her father could seem so calm and remote in the Control Tower, while men and women might live or die based on his orders. Now she felt she understood. "All down to being a good actor," she told herself. Right now she had to check if the cruise liner needed help and whether there were any other vessels in danger.

Atlanta had been trying in vain to make radio contact with the *Serenity*. She fervently hoped that this was just down to the radio. Something still seemed to be jamming all long range frequencies. She couldn't contact anyone.

Atlanta turned back to the radio with relief when she heard a woman's voice calling, "Tower to Swordfish... Tower to Swordfish... Please respond..."

Atlanta reacted automatically, "Swordfish to Tower, this is Lieutenant Shore."

The voice on the radio was replaced by that of Captain Jordan, "We've been trying to reach you Lieutenant. What is your situation?"

"Captain Jordan, we intercepted submarines engaged in an attack on..."

The radio crackled as *Swordfish* was jolted by a sudden turbulence. Atlanta glanced down at her monitor screen in horror. There had been an explosion far behind her on the seabed.

"Well that's it, gentleman," Doctor Venus announced with satisfaction. "You will be glad to know that was the final experiment."

"That's great," Captain Tempest sighed as he began to dress in a shabby grey overall, "I'm sure glad that's over." Troy frowned as he struggled to remember how long he and Phones had been on this beach, helping Doctor Venus with her experiments.

"Well, I sure hope it was all worthwhile," Phones muttered wearily, as WASP technicians unstrapped his arms and legs. He'd been secured to a device that would not have looked out of place in a mediaeval torture chamber. "Boy, I could murder a steak. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut after all those food pills."

Troy was still trying to remember, "Say, Doctor Venus, do these tests affect memory? I feel kinda... muzzy."

Venus looked blank for a moment and then smiled reassuringly, "Oh don't worry Captain Tempest, you'll feel fine in a little while. Just relax, try not to think about it."

But Troy wasn't listening. He was mesmerized by the lovely space doctor, and was now feeling very attracted to her. He really wished she'd call him 'Troy'. He wondered whether he might invite the gorgeous blonde back to his place tonight to, well, to get to know her better. Marina seemed to have disappeared — maybe visiting Pacifica? Now, if he could only throw Atlanta off the scent...

There was a thumping on Jacob Richards' door, "Mister Richards? Mister Richards!"

Richards released the door lock and Mason rushed into the office.

"Sir, the main lounge was depressurised. No other damage, sir except I found the flight crew had also been knocked out."

"Really? Are we still on course?"

"Yes sir. I've got Nolan looking after the controls while the pilot and navigator are recovering."

"Any guest casualties?"

"We're establishing that now sir, but we know the spy was one of them. While we were both taking our nap, Bradley and Morgan found him fooling around in the communications room. They cornered him in the lounge. Seems there was a fire fight, the windows must have been hit and the automatic doors sealed. Nobody could have survived."

"How unfortunate. Needed redecorating anyway I suppose. Were any transmissions sent?"

"No sir, There's just a temporary disruption to our internal communications net."

"I suppose this just means fewer guests for dinner tonight then."

Atlanta had made her initial report to Captain Jordan. Now that radio transmissions were working normally, Jordan had been able to confirm that the cruise liner *Serenity* was safe and being escorted to Sydney harbour by a World Navy destroyer. Atlanta was now taking *Swordfish* back to return to... the area where she had left Lieutenant Fisher.

There was no way to contact Fisher at long range, he'd only had his suit radio.

Time to report in. Atlanta turned to the radio, "Swordfish to Tower."

Captain Jordan responded, "Tower to Swordfish. Receiving."

"Captain, I'm nearing the position of the downed *Piranha*. There's a large crater, about a quarter of a mile across. I'm going down closer to the seabed."

Atlanta adjusted *Swordfish's* hydroplanes and throttled back to cruising speed, taking the sub down in a wide spiral dive.

"Picking up something on the aqua-scan... It could be the *Piranha*... Moving to investigate."

“Standing by, Swordfish.” responded Jordan

A faint voice on the radio caught Atlanta’s attention, “Hey, Lieutenant Fisher to Swordfish... Do you hear me?”

Atlanta hastily switched frequencies, “Swordfish here Lieutenant. Are you okay John?”

“I am now Atlanta. Things were a bit touch and go but I was able to jettison the Vesuvium in a torpedo.”

“Acknowledged. I’m bringing Swordfish alongside.”

“Tower to Swordfish. Atlanta, what is happening down there?” called Captain Jordan over the supersub’s radio.

“Lieutenant Fisher was successful sir. We have the World Navy sub intact for examination.”

“Well done both of you. I will have a WASP salvage crew sent out to you immediately. Remain with the sub until they arrive and then escort them to the WASP base in Brisbane.” ordered Jordan.

Doctor Venus looked around in confusion as the WASP technicians suddenly began to hurry away, heading towards the sea. Was that supposed to be happening? Then another thought came into her mind, causing her to scowl and bite her lip. She turned back to Troy and smiled, “Captain...” she began, but stopped short, grimacing as if in pain. Then, taking a deep breath, she continued, “Troy, I want you to come back to my place. I would... like to get to know you better...”

Troy blinked. Was he daydreaming?

“I guess,” Troy told himself, “the old Tempest charm never fails...”

“And...” Venus added, as she stepped between the two officers, and linked arms with them, “I want you to come along too, Lieutenant... er, Phones...”

“Uh?” Troy stammered, “You mean both of us? Right now?”

“Yes,” Venus said firmly. “That’s right, Troy.”

Troy and Phones made no effort to resist as the young woman marched them briskly away from the beach. But as they drew near to Venus’s apartment, something caused Troy to hesitate; this didn’t feel quite right somehow.

Doctor Venus tugged at his arm, “Don’t dawdle Troy, I want to get started right away.”

“Started?” Troy mumbled incoherently.

As if by way of explanation, Venus put her arms around Troy’s neck, and kissed him passionately.

Some sixth sense made Troy pull away and turn his head. He was horrified to see Atlanta Shore, standing in a nearby doorway, watching them. Her face was expressionless.

Jacob Richards looked up from his desk to see a large Chinese man enter his office. "Richards! What is the meaning of this?"

Richards shrugged, "Just a snooper of some kind Mr. Chen. He's been neutralised. Don't worry, there's only minor damage to the ship."

"Really? I understand you arranged to have the man brought aboard. And as a result, Fairfax, Beatty, and a couple of your worthless thugs have also been 'neutralised'."

"That's of no consequence. They were useful, now they're not."

"How very compassionate. Tell me, are you suggesting, that you yourself are 'useful'?"

"I have obtained our insurance to guarantee gratitude from our masters."

"I have no master, Richards. Masters are for inferior life forms such as yourself. Perhaps you would like to show me this great treasure of ours?"

"Most certainly. You will be impressed."

"That I doubt."

Richards pressed a stud under his desk and the large portrait of the media mogul slid aside to reveal a wall safe. He took a briefcase from the safe and set it carefully on his desk.

"I see, Richards. Very nice. Embossed with a navy crest... Gold plated auto destruct lock... Just the thing for the Aquaphibian about town. And the contents?"

"The technological military secrets of the world. The Earth that is. All micro-miniaturised. Army, Navy, WASP, WSP, WIN... The destruction of the Earth is only a minor setback. We can quickly rebuild our military might." said Richards confidently.

"My, wasn't Admiral Beatty a busy fellow? Forget your media hype for once Richards. Open it."

Richards carefully entered the code and swung the lid open.

Chen looked inside. "I see. Very nice packaging... 'Martian Delights'."

"What?"

"And what do we have inside? Oh, this is delightful, a tiny plastic model of a submarine, a spaceship, some kind of air-car and a Fireflash airliner, if I'm not mistaken... As you said Richards, the Earth's most advanced technology, all in miniature. Splendid. Our Aquaphibian friends will be delighted, no doubt."

Richards turned pale, "He did this..."

"I think Mr. Richards, that you can no longer be considered to be 'useful'."

"Atlanta." Troy stammered, feeling more uncomfortable with each passing second, "This isn't what it looks like... I... We were just..."

Atlanta said nothing, she simply ignored him and strode briskly away, heading towards the beach.

"Honey, wait!" Troy called after her, as he tried to pull himself free of Venus's grasp. "Atlanta! I can explain!"

Venus didn't release Troy's arm. Her grip tightened as she almost dragged him along with Phones.

As they turned the corner to Venus's accommodation, a large, ugly Aquaphibian stepped from the shadows, brandishing a ray gun.

"Stop!" it hissed as it moved towards them.

On the flight deck of the Lady Ann the navigator watched as indicator lights on his control panel began turning from red to green, "Internal and external communications back online Frank. All powering up nicely."

The pilot nodded, "It's all systems go then."

"Hey Frank, I'm picking up a radio call... Someone calling up the WSP."

"Could be someone in trouble. Who's sending it?"

"They're not saying... Some kind of coded message. But it sounds like it's a very local transmission, very close. Directly behind us."

"That's odd Dave," the pilot frowned as he adjusted his controls, "there's nothing on the astroscope."

"You don't suppose someone survived that explosion in the lounge?"

The pilot shook his head, "Supposing is above my pay grade. I'll call up Mr. Richards. Flight deck to Mr. Richards..."

"What now?" Richards switched on the intercom, "Richards here."

"Mr. Richards, there's some kind of coded message going out to the WSP. It's repeating over and over. It's a local broadcast. Some way aft of our position, moving at a speed close to ours."

"Another ship?"

"No sir, nothing on the scanners. It must be pretty small. Mr. Richards, it seems to be coming from approximately the area where the debris from the lounge would be."

"And what," Chen asked impassively, "do you propose to do now, Mr. Richards? Someone or something is relaying our position to the World Space Patrol."

"Archer, increase to space velocity 4 and change course — Two one nine zero red. Immediately!"

"Yes Mr. Richards. At once sir."

Richards snapped off the intercom.

"It seems, Richards, that you've been outsmarted, again." said Chen

"That stupid toy salesman!"

"Not so stupid. I believe he was working for the Universal Secret Service. They do not employ stupid people. Regrettably, I cannot claim the same for myself."

"It's not a problem Mr. Chen. We'll soon be out of the target zone and all of our enemies will be neutralized when the Aquaphibians strike."

“Soon? I hear no rocket motors firing. Your pilot seems somewhat tardy at taking orders, does he not?”

Richards hurriedly turned his attention back to the desk intercom, “Archer, why haven't we accelerated?”

“Mr. Richards,” the pilot replied nervously, “The engines... They're not firing!”

Richards turned pale, “What!?”

Chen's face was devoid of emotion, but his words were laced with contempt, “To use a favourite word of yours, Richards, the engines appear to have been neutralized.”

“Mister Richards,” Archer continued, “We've run a diagnostic on the main engines. There seems to be a severed fuel line topside. Someone will have to go out there and fix it.”

Chen pointed a finger at Richards, “Take a repair team and see that those engines are repaired swiftly. There is no time for delay.”

The salvage crew managed to lift the disabled World Navy Piranha sub to the surface without too many problems and Swordfish was soon escorting them back to the WASP Base at Brisbane with their prize.

The following day the Piranha had been stripped down and the state of the art automation that had controlled it, and evidently the other destroyed mini subs as well, was found to have been produced by Chen Industries — a company that had many manufacturing sites in the Solar System and beyond.

It's most recent factory had been opened on Zofeit less than a year ago.

The World Aquanaut Security Patrol reported its findings to the USS who tried to contact its multi-billionaire owner Chen Shun without success. They

were told he had left the Solar System on a business trip and his PA was unsure when he would be returning to Earth.

Captain Jordan ordered Atlanta to return Swordfish to Marineville for repairs before taking over Stingray's patrol duties.

"Run!" Venus shouted, as she stooped to pick up a large rock and hurled it at the alien. The creature staggered back as the rock struck it in the chest.

Troy and Phones followed Venus as they all ran.

"Atlanta!" Troy exclaimed, "She was heading for the beach. I've got to find her! Phones! Get the Doctor to safety!"

Troy Tempest turned and ran back the way they had come. He soon saw Atlanta, she was carrying a rifle now, and hurrying towards the beach. As Troy caught up with the girl he reached out to take her arm, but she responded with a vicious blow with the butt of the rifle which sent him sprawling into the sand. She began firing towards the sea.

As he got to his feet Troy could see that there was another Aquaphibian advancing along the beach. It was firing deadly laser bolts at the WASP technicians who had been assisting Venus.

The sound of gunfire split the air as the technicians began returning fire with their WASP pistols.

"What the..." Phones exclaimed, hearing the sounds of battle. "Get inside and lock your door, Doctor," he told Venus, and began running after Troy. As he came in sight of the sea, he realized that the Doctor had followed him. Taking in the situation at a glance, Phones quickly pulled Venus down behind a row of consoles. "Stay down!" he yelled in her ear. "Skipper! You okay?" he shouted above the din.

"Yeah! You got a gun?" Troy called back from the cover of a nearby rock.

“Not yet Skipper - wait ‘til I get my hands on one of those Aquaphibians! Where’s Atlanta?”

“Behind cover — I hope...” said Troy

Phones pointed across the beach. “Here comes the cavalry, Troy!”

Lieutenant Fisher was running towards the test area from the nearby blockhouses, leading a small team of armed security guards. The young relief controller seemed oblivious to Troy and Phones as the fighting intensified.

A strangely silent security guard tried to find cover beside Troy only to be decapitated by a laser bolt. Grabbing the man’s fallen rifle, Troy dashed across the sand to join Phones and Venus. “Phones, get Doctor Venus out of here. I’ll cover you.”

Troy was shocked to see Fisher fall dead as a laser beam punched a hole in his chest. Phones and Venus started to crawl back to the blockhouses as Troy began firing at the Aquaphibians with the dead guard’s weapon. He had to help Atlanta. He could see her hiding behind the test equipment, pinned down by the laser fire from an Aquaphibian.

Troy wondered why he felt so strange. Was it the effects of the underwater breathing experiments?

Suddenly Atlanta leapt to her feet and began blazing away with a rifle at the nearest Aquaphibian.

The hideous creature swung its weapon around and returned fire. Troy saw a beam of intense laser light hit Atlanta, almost cutting her in two. “No!” he screamed in horror “No! Not Atlanta!” He ran forward careless of his own safety and knelt beside the smoking corpse of... of... All of a sudden, it wasn’t Atlanta’s body lying there in the sand. It was the shattered corpse of an Aquaphibian...

Half paralysed with shock, Troy looked around to see everything begin to shimmer and change. His heart pounded as he saw Aquaphibians where there had been WASP security guards and technicians. The two advancing Aquaphibians were now a World Space Patrol officer and...

“Marina!” Troy yelled, waving his rifle. The girl didn’t appear to hear as she moved catlike amidst the carnage, her laser rifle blasting with deadly precision.

Energy bolts burst around Troy as he raced back across the beach. He was breathless as he dived into cover beside Phones and Venus. “Phones,” he gasped, “Those aren’t Aquaphibians attacking! It’s Marina!”

“Easy Troy,” Phones said, grabbing his friend’s shoulders, “We saw what happened.”

“You’re in shock, Captain,” Venus said firmly. “We can’t help Atlanta now; we have to get you away from here.”

“No, it wasn’t Atlanta - it was an Aquaphibian,” Troy protested.

Phones exchanged a worried glance with Venus. “They’re coming this way!” he said urgently. “Give me the rifle Skipper.”

“It’s Marina I tell you!” Troy shouted desperately, as Phones tried to wrest the rifle from his grip.

“Let... go... of the rifle... Troy,” Phones grunted, as he fought for possession of the weapon.

Without warning, Venus suddenly sprang on to Troy’s back, wrapping an arm around his throat, and using her weight to throw him off balance. Troy dropped the rifle as he fell backwards, Venus still clinging tightly to his neck.

Phones dived for the rifle and quickly aimed it at the leering Aquaphibian, now only yards away.

“Phones don’t!” Troy yelled, as he wrestled with Venus, “It’s Marina — you’ll kill her!”

Phones began to squeeze the trigger, but a beam of light struck the Lieutenant square in the back. The rifle fell from his senseless fingers as the force of the blast threw him to the ground.

“He’s dead!” Venus screamed as she struggled to her feet. “They’ll kill us all!”

Horrified, Troy stared down at the body of his fallen friend. Was Phones dead? What if Venus was right, and he was the one hallucinating?

“Stand aside!” Colonel Zodiac ordered, pointing his ray gun at Venus.

Suddenly uncertain, Troy stood protectively in front of Venus, but Venus was terrified, she pushed him aside and began to run. She cried out in pain as a second ray blast struck her in the back. She collapsed in the sand.

Steve hurried over to kneel beside the fallen doctor. “Don’t worry” he told Troy without looking up, “they are just stunned. You’re Captain Tempest?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Troy acknowledged as he hugged Marina.

Steve looked quickly around the beach as he got to his feet, “Colonel Zodiac, World Space Patrol. Let’s go Captain.” The Colonel gently picked Venus up in his arms. “Bring your buddy, we don’t have much time.”

Troy hoisted Phones over his shoulder, “But where the heck are we Colonel?”

“You’re a long way from Earth. Come on, we’ve got to get out of here... now!”

Marina kept her laser rifle at the ready as they all hurried towards the sea.

All was quiet now. Aquaphibian bodies lay strewn across the alien beach. Troy grimaced as he stepped around the torn body of one of the aliens, “Thank goodness Atlanta is safe and sound, back in the real Marineville.”
