

Chapter 23

Sneak Attack

A man in his early 60s with receding grey hair and a moustache looked up from his desk, as if just realising he had a visitor.

“Please take a seat, Beatty,” he said absently as he turned his attention back to the paperwork.

Beatty didn’t sit down. “And who the devil, may I ask, are you?”

“No, in point of fact, you may not”, the older man replied pleasantly, without looking up from his papers.

Beatty watched as the man signed some of the papers and finally pushed them aside. “I trust you are well?”

“As well as can be expected.”

“Good. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I’d like an explanation for this treatment.”

“Ah, I see. Well it appears that you have been going around hijacking WSP craft and attempting to murder their pilots. Will that be sufficient explanation for the time being?”

Beatty decided to sit down. “Black, no sugar.”

“Now, let me see... I believe you were on the Lady Anne. Would you like to tell me about that?”

Beatty shrugged, “I may as well. We are all going to die anyway.”

The man nodded, "A sad fact of life I'm afraid. It happens to all of us. Please tell me about your being on the Lady Anne. I believe the yacht is owned by Mr. Jacob Richards, multi-billionaire media mogul."

"Yes, and I would still be on that ship if not for your fake toy salesman."

The door slid open and a pretty girl came in with a tray. Beatty noticed she was wearing a shoulder holster over her white blouse.

"One black with no sugar, one white with four sugars," she said brightly and put the tray on the desk.

The man behind the desk smiled briefly, "Thank you."

The girl nodded and left the room.

"Fake toy salesman you say. I presume you are referring to our 'Mr. Smith'. I can assure you he's a genuine toy salesman. Though," he held up one of the papers he had just signed, "not one of our best it must be said. He just cost us the Martian Delights contract by not showing up. I don't suppose you would know of his whereabouts?"

Beatty shrugged, "The last time I saw Smith he was in the lounge of the Lady Anne. Are you seriously telling me you run a toy company?"

"Amongst other things, yes, I do."

"Then what gives you the right to hold me here?"

"Ah, that would be one of those other things."

"Are you claiming that you run the Universal Secret Service?"

The door slid open again before the man behind the desk could answer and Gray walked in with the chrome briefcase.

"All checks read negative sir. It was still sealed. We've unlocked it."

"Thank you. Leave it with me."

Gray placed the case on the corner of the desk and with only a brief glance at Beatty, left the two men alone again.

“I’m sure you know this is ‘Mr. Smith’s’ briefcase. It’ll be very interesting to see what is inside, will it not?”

“If you say so.” said Beatty.

“You were telling me why you were on the Lady Anne.”

“We were leaving the Solar System. There will be an attack and you are far too late to stop it.”

“An attack?”

“The sun will be turned into a nova.”

“Interesting. Tell me, when this event will occur.”

“Maybe a day, maybe a few hours.”

“Hopefully then, we’ll both have time to find out what Mr. Smith has in this case of his.”

“Don’t you understand? We’ll all die!”

“You are becoming hysterical Beatty,” snapped the older man “Control yourself. Now tell me how you know about this threat to our Solar System. Who have you been working with?”

“I will tell you nothing unless you tell me your name” said Beatty

“You may refer to me as S. I am the Operations Director of the Universal Secret Service and you will answer my questions. The tea you have just drunk contains a powerful fast acting truth drug. Now who have you been working with?”

Beatty tried hard to resist the drug but within a few minutes he felt compelled to answer any question S asked him.

He told the USS Chief about the alien Aquaphibians original plan to invade the Earth after it's defences had been weakened by a war between the World Government and the undersea races which he and the WP had conspired to start with the help of the World Intelligence Network. He gave the names of all of his colleagues involved in the conspiracy. He admitted stealing the top secret plans that S found in Twenty One's recovered brief case with the intention of handing them over to the Aquaphibians in exchange for a position of power on the Aquaphibian ruled Earth. He had realised the other World Security Chiefs were turning against Bandranaik and would not allow the destabilizing war with the undersea races. He knew the WP would soon be removed from office. The alien Aquaphibians would therefore not risk invading Earth with its Security forces still at full strength. What they could not have they would use their nuclear retardant ray to destroy. Beatty had therefore tried to escape from the Solar System with his colleagues in the Lady Anne.

"You will be relieved to know that due to the efforts of my agent and other undisclosed sources we were warned about the Aquaphibian fleet approaching the Solar System days ago. A WSP task force is now on its way to stop them as we speak."

"They have no chance of stopping them," said Beatty. "The Aquaphibian ships are indestructible."

"Let us hope for all our sakes you overestimate them" said S. "If we survive this attack you will spend the rest of your miserable traitorous life on Conva. You will not remember this interview — in fact you will not even remember your own name after the amnesia drug you are about to be injected with takes effect"

"No. You can't do this to me" screamed Beatty. "I have my rights"

"You have no rights what so ever on Mars or Conva," said S as he pressed a button on his desk.

Grey and the two other USS agents entered S's office.

"Take him away" ordered S.

So the alien attack on the Solar System was imminent.

Well there was nothing more that he could do to stop it and no time to evacuate.

The USS would issue a suitable press release to explain Beatty's imprisonment if and when the Aquaphibians were defeated.

It would not include any details of the pending alien attack on the Solar System.

Troy and Marina were cautiously making their way deeper into the undersea cave. Troy tensed when his flashlight picked out a sudden movement amongst the rocks ahead. As they edged closer he relaxed, it was just a fish. A large one — but just a fish.

Marina raised her rifle.

Troy hurriedly reached out his hand and pushed the rifle down,

"Marina — it's only a fish."

Marina shook her head violently and tried to raise her rifle.

The fish didn't move away, it simply watched, its mouth opening and closing.

Not the prettiest of fish perhaps, Troy thought, but it sure looks harmless.

"Leave it be!" Troy shouted as he tried to wrestle the rifle from Marina's grasp, "That's an order Marina!"

Doctor Venus slowly opened her eyes and stared blankly up at the ceiling. She seemed to be spinning, around and around. She lay motionless until the

spinning sensation subsided before trying to sit up. She was puzzled to find that she couldn't move her arms. The puzzlement rapidly turned into horror as her memory came flooding back. She was strapped to an operating table. Something warm touched her shoulder and she flinched in terror.

"Welcome ho-o-ome."

"Zoonie?" Venus turned her head, "Zoonie! Whatever are you doing here? I was just dreaming about you..." Venus blinked as she tried to clear her vision. Looking around she soon realized that she was lying on a bed in Fireball's medical bay. There was someone lying on another bed.

With an effort, Venus pulled her arms free and began slowly unfastening the straps that held her down. As soon as she had removed the straps she leaned down to hug the lazoan.

"Whatever is happening... Why am I in here?"

Venus got unsteadily to her feet and looked down at her grubby grey overalls. She felt very weak. She recognised the man lying strapped to the other bed; it was Aquanaut 'Phones' Sheridan. He was dressed in the same strange overalls, apparently fast asleep. Kneeling down beside him, she gently lifted his eyelids.

"Heavy coma stun," she said to herself. "Guess he'll be out for at least another hour without the antidote."

Sitting back down on her bed, Venus tried to gather her jumbled memories together. Zoonie sat quietly beside her, his big head resting against her shoulder.

"I was kidnapped by Aquaphibians. Marina helped me and then..." Venus rubbed her forehead, "Then I woke up on an operating table. I remember being back at Marineville doing experiments of some kind. I invited Captain Tempest and Phones back to my apartment to.... to... And then Aquaphibians

attacked and I was shot.” She shook her head, “I must have been having some really tootie nightmares. Was any of it real? If only you could tell me, Zoonie.”

Venus knew that she’d have to find out what was going on. Had Steve rescued her from the Aquaphibians? Why had she and Phones been strapped down in the medical bay? She’d have to be careful... Perhaps the Aquaphibians had captured Fireball.

Venus slowly got up and walked unsteadily over to the open door with Zoonie padding along behind her. “Zoonie, you stay here,” she told him, “I’ll be back soon.”

Troy pulled off his wetsuit jacket as he stepped onto Stingray’s lower deck. Marina looked confused, and a little afraid. Troy wasn’t angry with Marina, he was just surprised to see how irrational she could become. “Listen to me Marina,” he said carefully, “It was just a fish in that cave. Sure, it looked a bit like the one Titan calls ‘Teufel’, but Titan’s just superstitious. You don’t have to believe that crazy nonsense.”

Marina shook her head vigorously.

Troy put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, “Maybe that kind of fish looks scary to you — but I know a harmless fish when I see one. For all we know it’s a rare species; we aren’t here to destroy the wildlife.”

Troy pictured himself eating in the Marineville Tower Diner as Phones toyed with a fish-finger on his plate.

“Quick Skipper — better get your gun. I think this fish wants to rule the world. Think you can save Mankind again Troy?”

Troy blinked. That little daydream had been so vivid. He knew he'd never live it down if Phones found out he'd been shooting harmless fish while he'd been out in space facing alien battle-cruisers.

Stepping cautiously out into the corridor, Venus quietly began making her way through the ship. Outside the navigation bay, she paused and listened. She opened the door, ducking back out of sight as it slid open. There was no-one there. She'd half hoped to see Matt sitting at his console...

Furtively Venus made her way over to the main console and flicked a switch. A large screen on the wall immediately displayed an image of Fireball's flight deck. She almost cried out when she saw Steve slumped motionless in his chair and Robert sprawled across the deck in front of him.

Stumbling along as fast as her weakened legs would carry her, Venus left the navigation bay and made her way down the corridor, and into Fireball Junior. When she reached the jetmobile bay she hastily grabbed a medical bag from a locker.

Venus fell to her knees as a wave of dizziness hit her.

"Physician heal thyself..." she muttered as she rummaged through the medical supplies. She swallowed a couple of pills before she staggered to her feet again.

Once inside Junior's control cabin, Venus rushed over to Steve. He was still breathing. "Oh Steve... What is happening?"

Through the clear expanse of the nose-cone canopy Venus could see the stars cartwheeling across the black void of space. Fireball was spinning rapidly.

Over the radio Matt was calling desperately, "Steve! You've gotta fire the port retros... Can you hear me? Fireball will break apart!"

The strange alien fish in the cave redoubled its efforts to directly control the Stingray skipper. It had been concentrating on its Aquaphibian space-crews, urging them to ignore the attacking space-ships and destroy the Earth's Sun. But now Stingray was a more immediate threat. The Earth female had proved somehow resistant to its telepathic control, but the male was a different matter... The fish had probed Troy's mind, finding the strengths and the weaknesses. It had gently pushed the WASP captain, encouraging the right thoughts, making them stronger. It knew that if Marina was killed, the shock would likely bring Tempest out of its control, but there were other ways of having the human subdue the water-breathing female.

Marina realised that the fish in the cave must be using its telepathic powers to protect itself by influencing Troy. She had to explain. Get Troy to snap out of it. They had to destroy the fish.

Marina turned and hurried back to her cabin to get her translating device.

Troy followed her, "That's right Marina, you go and get out of those overalls. I guess we can both take it easy..."

Marina sat on her bunk as she reached up to a shelf to get the translator device. She turned in alarm as Troy pushed open the cabin door and grabbed her wrist.

"No need for that Marina," Troy told her as he kicked the door closed, "I know exactly what you want..."

Marina was shocked. She knew exactly what Troy had in mind.

Venus quickly sat down in the empty co-pilot's chair, and reached across to activate the spaceship's retro rocket controls. She fixed her eyes on the readouts — timing would be crucial. Holding her breath, she began making

fine adjustments with the control yoke. To her relief, XL5 gradually righted herself, the swirling pattern of stars outside slowly coming to a stop.

As soon as the ship was stable, Venus took a hypodermic from the medical bag and gave Steve an injection. She watched his face anxiously for signs of a reaction to the drug.

“Ninety... Must stop him...” Steve mumbled.

Aboard Fireball XL1 Matt let out a sigh of relief, “Boy, Steve sure is one heck of a pilot. Wonder why he don’t answer? Guess the radio’s out... Still, one thing’s for sure, Steve is okay — he’d need a clear head for a manoeuvre like that one.”

Venus spoke quietly but firmly to Steve, who was still seated in the pilot’s chair, “Listen to me Steve, you are safe, I’m here. Everything is going to be okay.”

“Uh?” Steve’s eyes didn’t open but his head lifted slightly. “Venus?”

Venus leaned forward and kissed the Colonel briefly on the lips. “Yes Steve, it’s Venus.”

“Steve! Can you hear me?” Matt called from the radio, “There are three ships headed straight for you! Steve! Fire missiles!”

Venus didn’t hesitate. She sent a nose-cone missile straight towards the lead ship. Four more missiles followed from the extended missile racks on the port and starboard sides of the ship.

“Dive dive dive...” Venus said through clenched teeth as she pushed XL5’s nose down and fired the main boosters. The ship blasted forwards and downwards, beneath the oncoming ships.

On the central viewer, Venus could see that XL1 was launching

another salvo of missiles from her aft launchers.

“Great shooting Steve!” Matt exclaimed over the radio.

As Venus swung XL5 around to pursue the alien ships, she activated the transmitter, “Matt, I’m piloting Fireball... Steve’s unconscious... What is happening?”

Venus readied another batch of missiles as she spoke into Fireball XL5’s radio, “Matt... We’re coming up on those ships now... Preparing to launch interceptors!”

“Uh?” Steve groaned as he tried to focus his mind, “Interceptors?”

“Steve!” Venus said gently but firmly, “Just relax, you’ve got minor head injuries.”

“Relax?” Steve’s memory flooded back. “We’ve got to destroy those ships...”

“I know Steve... Missiles away!” Four interceptors streaked towards three target ships — and detonated tearing huge holes in their hulls.

“We’ve got to stop them...” Steve gasped. “Ram them like... Like Ninety did!”

“Ninety?” Venus said worriedly, “Steve what...?”

“Venus...” Matt called excitedly over the radio, “You’ve done it! They seem to be slowing down... Coming to a stop.”

“Maybe...” Steve said groggily, “They’re about to use that ray of theirs...”

“I don’t think so Steve, There’s no sign of a force-field. No sign of a power build up for their primary weapon. They are drifting dead in space. Only thing is, I have a feeling that was just the first wave...”

Through Troy Tempest’s eyes an alien mind watched with cold satisfaction as Marina struggled in vain against his grip. Humans were so emotional. It

would almost be regrettable to destroy this one. How easy it was to substitute raw emotion for reason.

Many light years away, deep beneath the Pacific Ocean, Teufel could sense that its adversary had lowered its guard at last. So, its distant relative had planned to destroy all life on Earth — including Teufel of Titanica. The fish concentrated all of its mental power on striking out at the attacker.

In that instant, Troy slightly relaxed his grip on Marina's wrists. She managed to pull a hand free and reached for her fallen translator. There was only one way to get through to Troy — she smashed the heavy device against his head. Troy fell forwards onto the bed and lay still.

Deep in the Pacific Ocean, the strange fish known as Teufel sank wearily down to the seabed, exhausted by its ongoing deadly telepathic struggles with its counterpart on the distant water-world

Fireball XL5 and Fireball XL1 were hanging in free float not far from the wreckage of three huge alien spaceships.

Steve called up Professor Matic in XL1,

"Matt, we still can't get a message out on the neutroni. We've got to warn Space City."

"It's the radiation from all the missiles and debris Steve. Kinda like sunspot interference. We'll have to get clear of it before we can use the neutroni for long range transmissions."

"Can you give me a course Matt?"

"Steve, I figure it'll take those ships several days to reach the Solar System. We may be able to give Zero some vital information if we take a half hour or so to examine those wrecks."

"But what are you hoping to find Professor?"

"A way to get missiles through their force-fields. We made little impact but Venus gave them a real pounding."

"I see what you mean Matt. Some kind of Achilles Heel."

"I've been scanning those wrecks Steve, I'm not detecting any signs of life aboard. Power levels at zero. This might be our only chance to see what makes these ships tick"

"Okay Matt. let's go take a look around the nearest ship. Armed, just in case."

"Sure thing Steve, I'll go grab a thruster pack."

Steve called up Venus on the intercom who had gone back to the medical bay.

"How's your patient, doctor?"

"Lieutenant Sheridan is still sleeping peacefully Steve. I could administer the antidote..."

"Might be best to let him sleep it off. He may still be under hypnotic influence. Venus, I'm going over to look at those wrecks with Matt."

"Okay Steve."

"While I'm gone, try and get through to Space City. We've got to warn Earth those ships are on their way. Set up a repeating message. Then I want you to scan the area for any sign of Ninety."

"Yes of course. I'll go over to the navigation bay right away. Be careful Steve, there are very high levels of radiation out there. The oxygen pills should protect you but don't stay out there too long."

"Okay Venus. I'll go meet Matt and we'll take a look at those ships."

"Steve, you took a nasty blow to the head — you really should be resting."

"I guess resting will have to wait for now. This shouldn't take long."

Tossing the broken translator to the deck Marina quickly climbed over Troy's prone body to get out of the cabin.

Once outside Marina sealed the door and hurried back up to Stingray's control area. She sat down at the controls and loaded both sting missile tubes and slammed her hand down on the firing buttons.

Four lethal sting-missiles sped from Stingray and chased one another towards the cavern. Seconds later, the missiles detonated and destroyed all trace of the cave mouth in great bubbling explosions.

The alien fish was still locked in a mental struggle with Teufel as the missiles exploded around it. There was no way it could protect itself this time — all of its energy was being used to counter the psychic onslaught. Within seconds Marina launched four more sting missiles at the site of the undersea cavern. More explosions ripped the seabed apart.

Steve Zodiac had joined Professor Matic out in space and using their thruster packs they were getting near to one of the wrecked alien ships. He took his communicator from his belt, "Venus, we're over at the nearest ship..."

"Okay Steve. I've set up an automatic broadcast to Space City. The radiation is still blocking my calls. I'm making systematic scans of the local area for Ninety, but there's a lot of static."

Over in Fireball XL1, someone else was listening attentively to the radio. Sergeant Mahoney was sitting on a bunk in the space-jail, carefully twisting a pair of wires he'd torn from a light panel. He was going to use some of his vast experience in WSP security matters to get out of his prison...

As the dust settled, Marina leaned forward in her seat, staring intently at the debris. There was no sign of life out there, and she felt no malevolent mind probing. For a moment she let herself relax sighing with relief. Then she remembered Troy...

Hastily grabbing a first aid kit from a locker, Marina rushed back to her cabin. She hesitated at the door. What if Troy attacked her again? She shrugged — what if he did? She knew he hadn't meant her any harm, and now the real danger was over. She opened the door...

In Fireball XL5's navigation bay Venus was relieved to hear Steve's voice over the radio. "Won't be long now Venus. Matt's almost seen enough of these ships. We're about to return to Fireball."

"Okay Steve. Continuing to scan. So far nothing but debris."

Matt was carefully examining some wiring in an exposed part of the outer hull of the alien ship. Steve steered his thruster pack over to join him, "Found something interesting Professor?"

"I'm not sure... But I think..." Matt took the ray gun from his belt and adjusted the setting.

"Why the gun, Matt?"

"I'll need to cut a piece of this material to take back to the lab."

While Matt worked, Steve glanced back over at the two Fireball ships. "Matt!" he suddenly shouted urgently, "XL1 — she's firing her retros!"

Fireball XL1 was slowly moving backwards, drawing away from XL5.

"Steve!" Matt exclaimed, "It must be Mahoney!"

"This is going to hurt you more than me Zodiac." Mahoney gloated over the radio, "A whole lot more."

Steve spoke urgently, "Venus, Get up to the controls, fire main boosters! Evasive! Quickly!"

"Tell me, Colonel, how fast do you think that doctor of yours can run?"

"He's still got three missiles." Matt said worriedly, "He's backing XL1 out of the blast range."

"That I am Professor. Don't want to damage Space Patrol property now, do I?"

Missile racks began to extend from hatches in XL1's hull.

"Let's see now... Ten... Nine... Eight.... Seven..."

Breathlessly Venus rushed into XL5's main control cabin and flung herself into the pilot's seat, as over the radio Mahoney continued his countdown, "Three... Two... One... Zero and go!"

Fireball XL5's main engines fired just as the interceptor missile streaked forward on a plume of white smoke. The missile narrowly missed XL5 as the ship banked to starboard.

Venus gripped the controls of XL5 tightly as she flung the ship into a dive.

"I won't miss a second time Doctor Venus." Mahoney taunted over the open radio channel. "Don't worry Colonel, once I've taken care of your beautiful Doctor of Space Medicine, I'll be back to take care of you!"

"Don't be a fool!" Steve responded, "Give yourself up!"

"No thank you Colonel Zodiac. I don't want to end my life on the Prison Planet. Once you and your friends are out of the way I can return to Earth — as a hero!"

"If the rest of those Aquaphibian ships aren't stopped there'll be no Earth to return to!"

"Ah, and in that event I'll still be on the winning side Zodiac. Heads I win, tails you lose."

"Matt! Venus isn't trained for space combat — Mahoney is. She won't have a chance! We've got to do something!"

Matt clenched his fists as he watched the two ships disappear, "We can't do a thing Steve there's no power, the reactors are dead."

"That's right Doctor..." Mahoney jeered over the open radio channel, "Your boyfriend can't help you. But don't worry, I'll take care of you..."

Venus made no attempt to reply as she struggled to evade her pursuer. She tensed when she heard a high-pitched whine and a red warning light flashed on her console — incoming missile... Desperately Venus pulled back on the controls, lifting Fireball's nose up and causing the ship to loop back the way it had come. The interceptor altered course, relentlessly homing in on its quarry.

Steve heard the tell-tale warning sound over his radio. "Venus!" he yelled into his communicator, "Enemy missile lock! Engage ECM! Now!"

Venus obeyed the order almost without thinking as she leaned forward in her seat and toggled the missile jamming frequencies. The warning light winked out and she immediately threw XL5 into another tight turn.

In XL1's central control dome Mahoney cursed as he watched his missile lose its tracking and shoot off into space. Now there was only one missile left. "You won't dodge the next missile Doctor. I'll get real close before I fire. Say goodbye to your pretty girlfriend, Zodiac."

Mahoney was rapidly gaining on XL5, matching all of Venus's evasive manoeuvres with contemptuous ease. Smoothly bringing XL1 close behind the fleeing ship, he primed the last interceptor missile for firing, "Okay Doctor Venus, time's up. Now you die!"

"They're coming back!" Matt shouted as the two ships came into sight. Steve and Matt watched in horror as the ships hurtled towards them.

Up ahead of her, Venus could see the three huge alien ships. She had to turn again. If she was going to die she'd not endanger Steve and Matt. She slammed on the retros so she could slow for the turn. To her horror she felt the ship lurch to one side. The starboard retros had failed...

Mahoney cursed as he saw XL5 swing around on its axis so that it was now travelling backwards. "What the devil!" he exclaimed as he realized he was dead in the other ship's sights. Fearing a nosecone launched missile, he fired XL1's retros, throwing the ship to one side. Seconds later it exploded as it plunged into the third huge alien vessel. There was no sound as the two ships were torn apart in a white hot ball of superheated gases and molten metal.

"Venus!" Steve called desperately into his radio as he shielded his eyes from the glare of the blazing inferno.

"Steve! Are you both okay?" came the worried reply, "I seem to have got into a spin. I'll have the ship under control in a moment and get back to you..."

A few minutes later, Venus was gingerly piloting XL5 back towards the two remaining alien spacecraft. Her mind was full of questions. There had been no time for Steve to brief her on all of the events that had taken place over these last few... Days? Months? She shook her head. She couldn't seem to remember much. Why had Sergeant Mahoney tried to kill her? And there was something else. She'd felt Mahoney's bitterness, felt his hatred. She knew it wasn't imagination. She'd felt it. That was so odd.

Now she was feeling something else. Resignation mixed with loneliness and despair. But why? Surely the immediate danger was over now.