

Chapter 4

Under Pressure

Commander Shore had made his decision. He had sent Stingray to investigate the 'Giant Meteor' that had apparently fallen into the Pacific the previous week. He'd had a dozen scientists clamouring for Stingray to help them find their lost rock. Up until now he'd thought it was a waste of time. But the impact area was fairly close to Titanica...

Atlanta answered the incoming radio call, "Tower to Stingray. Go ahead Troy."

"We are on course for the search area," Troy reported, "Rate Six. Estimated time of arrival about six hours."

"Okay Troy. So far the World Navy has found no trace of wreckage, but that's deep water out there."

"You can say that again Atlanta. I guess the navy still doesn't have any submarines to equal Stingray. If there's anything down there it's up to us to find it. Has Marina shown up?"

"Not yet Troy, but she is off duty. She's probably just gone swimming."

"Yeah... That's what worries me. If she does show up..."

"I'll tell you if we hear anything Troy. Your next check in is in three hours."

"Okay Atlanta. P.W.O.R."

Phones glanced over at Troy, "What do you think's out there Skipper?"

Troy sighed, "Maybe a few bits of wreckage. Maybe some bits of rock... The important thing is we'll be pretty close to Titanica."

“Yeah. I guess this is our lucky break Troy.”

Troy nodded, “We’ll be maintaining radio silence when we start heading down into the Marianas Trench... We use our initiative to search - and we won’t waste too much time looking for space debris.”

“I sure hope we can get Doctor Venus out of there Skipper.”

“It’s going to be tough Phones, that’s for sure. You’d better get some sleep, I’ll wake you in four hours.”

Titan watched as two of his Aquaphibians half carried, half dragged a struggling Doctor Venus back into his audience chamber. She was secured to a pillar with heavy chains.

Titan spoke to his guards, “I will interrogate this Terrainean female. Go! See that no-one disturbs me.”

Venus tugged uselessly at the chains that bound her wrists as Titan walked towards her. She wore only her now dirty and torn nightdress. Her hair fell untidily about her tear-stained face. Venus felt wretched, but she was still unbowed and defiant, “I won’t tell you a thing!” she spat, her voice betraying her now weakened condition.

Titan made no reply. He stepped forward and roughly grasped her chin with one hand, forcing her to turn her head. She saw a large round window, and beyond it, a large ugly fish was staring fixedly at her. She tried to turn away, but Titan held her firmly.

“You will remain still Terrainean, while mighty Teufel, the sea god, looks upon you.”

The ugly fish’s mouth suddenly gaped open, and the terrified doctor was blinded by a dazzling beam of light, which struck her full in the face. She

tried in vain to close her eyes against the glare, which seemed to be burning deep into her mind.

Titan relaxed his hold on her, but Venus did not move a muscle. She stood transfixed by the probing light.

As Titan watched, Venus began to speak slowly, in a toneless voice, "Oxygen pills... breathing underwater... WASP... Troy Tempest..."

Titan listened intently, as Venus continued to talk as if she were in a dream.

After half an hour had passed, Teufel's light beam faded, and the fish moved away, still watching from a distance. Venus slumped in her chains, unconscious.

Many miles from the city of Titanica, the WASP submarine, Stingray arrived at the impact zone.

"Stingray to Tower." Troy called over the sub's radio. "We have arrived at search area."

"Tower to Stingray." Commander Shore responded from Marineville. "Proceed with search Troy. The World Navy can't find anything. There has to be something left down there, and heaven only knows what it might be. Radio silence now Troy. Good hunting."

"Thanks Commander. PWOR." Troy flicked off the radio. "Gee Phones, I wish we knew what's happened to Marina."

"Yeah Troy, I guess the Commander would have said if she'd shown up back at Marineville."

"It's my guess that she's gone to Titanica... Okay Phones, activate pressure compensators. Let's take her down. Keep your eyes and ears open. We are already too close to Titan's territory for my liking."

When Venus awoke, she found that she was lying on the floor, trussed up tightly with ropes. She winced as she felt just how tight her bonds were. Looking about her she soon realised that she was aboard a small submarine. She struggled to get into a sitting position. The two Aquaphibians standing at the sub's console, briefly looked back at her, but then quickly returned their attention to controlling their vessel, gurgling to each other in their strange alien voices. They were obviously confident that their prisoner was very well tied up.

A slight movement caught Venus's attention. She turned her head. Behind her she could see several large crates... The lid of one of them was slowly sliding aside... Venus cast an anxious look back at the crew. They were still staring ahead. Suddenly the top of the crate fell to the floor with a loud thud. Instinctively Venus rolled into a corner. The two Aquaphibians whirled around, weapons ready, but immediately fell to the deck, as a burst of gunfire split the air.

Stingray's searchlights cut through the darkness as the submarine began a spiral dive down into the Marianas Trench.

Phones suddenly clutched at his headphones, "Skipper! I'm getting a positive SONAR sounding... near the sea bed..."

"Can you get a fix on it Phones?"

"Sure thing Troy, it's clear as a bell. One hundred and two green. Depth thirty five thousand."

"Six and a half miles down... Wreckage?" Troy wondered, as he nosed the sub down, her searchlights penetrating the gloomy depths.

“No Skipper... It’s moving! But very slowly.” Phones concentrated for a moment, making a few adjustments to his hydrophone equipment. “Say, it’s pretty big, well over six hundred feet long, and I hear engines!”

“That could be a Navy sub Phones... The Atlantis was in the search group... but she couldn’t survive the pressure down that deep.”

Phones looked worried, “Those submarine aircraft carriers are pretty good tubs — but hell, if it’s down there, it’s sure in big trouble!”

“Flood all tanks! Dive Phones! Rate Six!”

At six hundred knots, Stingray rapidly closed on the unseen craft. The pinging in Phones’ headset grew more rapid. “She’s speeding up Troy... Leaving the seabed!”

“There!” Troy exclaimed. “I see it! What in the name of?!”

As the craft became more visible, Troy and Phones were certain that it was not a Navy sub...

“There’s another craft Troy... That thing’s pursuing it... sounds like a Terror Fish.”

Sure enough, there in the glow of Stingray’s lights they could soon see the tiny shape of a Terror Fish, frantically weaving and dodging, as a huge shape bore down upon it.

“Whatever that thing is Phones... We’re going to give it a wide berth. One eighty green!”

Stingray swung around in a tight arc, and headed back the way it had come, engines straining.

“Stingray to Tower...” Troy called over the radio, “Taking evasive action... There’s something down here... huge... Over six hundred feet long...”

Atlanta's voice replied, faint, barely audible, "Tower to Stingray, please repeat... Your signal is weak... Troy..." the radio crackled briefly, and then went silent.

"Something's jamming the radio..." Troy muttered, trying to get more speed out of Stingray, as she headed upwards.

"We're in trouble Troy! That thing's after us now... and there's no sign of the Terror Fish."

Sure enough, the huge ungainly intruder was swinging around to face Stingray, its speed increasing all the time.

"It's gaining on us Troy... and it's nearly at rate seven..."

"Okay Phones... we can't outrun it," Troy said grimly, Prepare sting missiles one and two. Let's see if they're as tough as they look!"

A moment later Stingray turned one hundred and eighty degrees, and two sting missiles sped towards the huge pursuing craft. As Stingray slowed, Troy and Phones watched in horror as the missiles exploded hundreds of feet short of their target.

"What now Skipper?" Phones asked tonelessly, as the enemy craft bore down upon them, blocking out the view.

"Pray Phones... just pray."

Soon there was only one craft prowling the seabed, a big ugly one. It continued to gain speed as it headed upwards, its appetite well and truly satisfied.

The atmosphere in the Marineville Control Tower was tense. It was over twenty minutes since they had last heard from Stingray.

Atlanta almost jumped when a call came in over the radio. “Father, I’ve got Space City calling you — it’s Wilbur.”

“Okay, Atlanta. Put him on.” Commander Shore said as he steered his hover chair over towards the wall screen.

The stylised videophone logo was replaced by an image of the World Space Patrol Chief, “Sam, any news about Doctor Venus?”

“We’ve got trouble Wilbur. We just lost contact with Stingray... She’d just found your mystery spaceship down in the Marianas Trench.”

“Commander,” Lieutenant John Fisher called from over at the subsea communications console, “the World Navy submarine Atlantis has reported sighting something huge moving towards the surface.”

“It must be the craft Troy sighted before... before...” sobbed Atlanta.

Shore abruptly ended the video link with Zero and turned to his daughter. “Now Atlanta, we are not writing Stingray off yet. Fisher, call up the Atlantis. I want to speak directly to Captain Jordan.”

Commander Shore wished there were some other vessel within striking range of the alien craft. He had no doubts about the sub’s capabilities. Atlantis was a state-of-the-art submarine aircraft carrier. It could deploy 200 jet fighters and was packed with high tech weaponry of its own. No problems there. The problem was Jordan. Shore regarded the Navy man as a coward, based on his previous dealings with him.

A few moments later the French skipper of the Atlantis responded, “Commander Shore. We are in pursuit of the alien craft, and are standing by to engage. It will not escape us.”

“Listen Captain Jordan, we just lost contact with Stingray. She was investigating that alien space-ship.”

“Most regrettable Commander. I will search the area, when we have dealt with the alien vessel. Atlantis will make short work of this. ‘Ow does that saying go? The bigger they are the harder thezzzzz ...”

“Sir,” Fisher reported, “We’ve lost all contact with Atlantis...”

The hot early afternoon sun beat down upon the South Pacific island base of the World Space Patrol. Resting on the launch rail beside the revolving Control Tower a gleaming silver-hulled spaceship was preparing to blast off for Sector 25 - without Venus.

Colonel Steve Zodiac sat morosely at the controls of Fireball XL5, as the last minutes were counting down. He couldn’t just fly off on patrol while the woman he... yes damn it, the woman he loved was held captive by Titan. Mutinous thoughts were running through his mind when suddenly the red alert klaxons blared.

“Steve,” Commander Zero called over the radio, “we’ve got trouble.”

“Trouble, Commander?”

“Big trouble, Steve! Stingray found that missing spaceship... and it’s hostile. The Atlantis is engaging it now.”

“What happened to Stingray?”

“We don’t know, Steve. Shore says they’ve lost contact...”

“There must be two more of those craft still in orbit — some sort of invisibility shield?”

“Get XL5 launched...” ordered Commander Zero, “if any more alien ships are up there I want them destroyed, invisible or not!”

Seconds later, Zero watched from the tower windows as Fireball XL5 blasted down the mile long launch rails and soared into the clear blue sky.

Meanwhile the World Navy submarine Atlantis was getting into hot water. Captain Jordan's Exec had bad news, "All radio contact lost sir... some sort of electronic jamming."

"It will not 'elp them now mon ami," Jordan answered grimly. "Our aircraft already have the enemy's position. The first air to sea missiles will strike anytime now."

Sweeping low over the Pacific Ocean, the carrier's planes were already launching their missiles. They plunged into the sea and streaked down into the inky depths.

The alien space submarine was still heading upwards as the first missiles struck home. The sub shuddered, but maintained its course and speed.

"Troy... what's happening?" Phones called out groggily as Stingray shuddered to numerous impacts.

"That sub..." Troy groaned, "It must've swallowed us whole..."

Troy was rubbing his head trying to wake himself up. He couldn't see much in the dim light, but they seemed to be inside some kind of chamber.

Phones started checking the instruments on the control console. "Maybe Commander Shore is bombarding the area with hydromic missiles Skipper... Say we don't seem to have any power, everything is dead."

Troy winced as another explosion rocked Stingray, "And that's going to include us too at this rate...."

"Another 'it!" exclaimed Jordan triumphantly, as he watched his forward viewing screen on the Atlantis. A further blast enveloped the alien vessel

and it began to slow. Then a dark, ominous black liquid fog began to pour out of it, a cloud that quickly spread.

“What?!” Jordan gasped as the view screen clouded over. “Full astern!”

The Atlantis shuddered slightly as the powerful engines slowed. The bridge suddenly became filled with the shouts of officers and crew calling out in disbelief.

“We’ve lost power!”

“Engines not responding!”

“All internal communications failed!”

Then the lights went out.

Fireball XL5 sat in geostationary orbit, near the location where the alien ships had first appeared; but there was no sign of any space craft there now. Where were the two hidden alien ships? If they were shielded in some way they could attack without warning.

“Prime interceptors, Robert” ordered Steve, not wishing to take any chances.

“Prime interceptors. Prime interceptors,” repeated XL5’s robot co-pilot in his monotone electronic voice as he carried out Steve’s instructions.

Steve couldn’t get Venus out of his mind. Why had she started these crazy underwater breathing tests at Marineville? Why hadn’t the WASP captured Titan and imprisoned him years ago? They could have locked him up with the Subterrain Chief and thrown away the key.

In the patrol ship’s navigation bay Professor Matic studied the astroscope from his circular desk looking for any sign of the aliens. He was also worried about Venus. The thought of anything happening to her... Suddenly he found

what he was looking for on the astroscope. “Steve! Steve!” called Matt excitedly into the intercom. “Two ships just appeared on the ‘scope out of nowhere. According to these readings they must be over 600 feet long. They’re picking up speed and heading out of the Solar System.”

“Give me a course code to follow them Matt,” ordered Steve. “If these aliens are responsible for the loss of Stingray I want to find out who we are dealing with before we blow them out of the space sky.”

Lieutenant Ninety had just come back on duty in the Space City control room. “Sir!” he exclaimed, as he adjusted the space scanners.

“What is it man?” Commander Zero snapped impatiently.

“Unidentified craft heading for space... Pacific area, reference...”

“Never mind that... Alert the orbital missile batteries. Intercept it, fast!”

The huge alien space submarine hurtled up through the atmosphere trailing clouds of thick black smoke. A flight of navy fighters kept a respectful distance.

“Stay clear — that stuff will knock out all electronics. Launch your missiles... now!” ordered the lead pilot.

They knew it was hopeless, but they had to try something. Seven jet-fighters released two dozen air to air missiles and then peeled off, heading away from the point of impact. There was no impact... All missiles exploded uselessly half a mile from their rapidly receding target.

“Orbital station E5 to Space City... Cannot locate target... Request more data...”

“It’s no good sir...” Ninety stared at the space scanner. “Nothing... we’ve lost it.”

“Alert Fireball XL5,” ordered Commander Zero.

The telephone began to ring, “Zero here... Mister President! I... that is...You see...”

