

Chapter 5

Powerless!

Fireball XL5 continued to plunge headlong into the dark void of outer space, her nuclear hyperdrive motors delivering maximum thrust. Far ahead, the two vast alien spaceships were apparently oblivious to the pursuit.

“Maintain full power Robert,” Steve ordered. He was keeping an anxious eye on the instrument panel, where a number of gauges gave readings that were moving slowly, but surely into the danger zone.

“Steve,” Matt called over the intercom, “the motors are overheating!”

“Tell me something I don’t know Matt.”

“Space City to XL5,” Lieutenant Ninety called over the radio, “Space City calling XL5. Come in Colonel Zodiac.”

“We’re still pursuing the alien ships Lieutenant. Will report as soon as...”

“Listen Steve,” cut in Commander Zero, “the unidentified craft has just left Earth and disappeared off the space scanners. Likely it’s heading your way. Don’t take any chances. Contact with World Navy Submarine Atlantis was lost just after she commenced her attack run.”

“Okay Commander, we’ll be on our toes.”

In the navigation bay Matt had heard the radio call. He quickly began adjusting the astroscope, aligning it back towards Earth.

“You get that Matt?” Steve called over the intercom.

“Sure did Steve. Don’t worry, I’ll be watching our backs.”

“Thanks Matt.”

Steve's eyes never left the main monitor, and the bright dots that indicated his quarry. But his mind wandered to thoughts of Doctor Venus, and he cursed the fact that he was not doing a thing to help her.

In the dark and silent control room of the Terror Fish submarine, Marina was examining the sub's control systems. There was no power. The distant explosions which had shaken the fish-like craft had ceased. Now all was silent. All had gone so well. She'd entered Titanica unseen and overheard Titan's plans for the Space Doctor. She'd hidden aboard the Terror Fish that was going to take Venus to Aquatraz, found an atomic rifle and waited for the right moment to strike. She'd taken control, they were on their way to freedom... And then... Marina slammed her fist down on the useless control console.

Doctor Venus put a hand on the girl's shoulder, "Thank you Marina. Thank you for all you've done. We'll get out of this mess; I know we will."

Marina nodded and smiled briefly in the darkness.

"We must have been swallowed up by that huge submarine," Venus continued, her voice sending strange echoes around the cabin. "I expect we're being taken back to Titanica..."

Marina shook her head. She was sure that Titan had no vessels of this immense size and power. She felt that they had to leave the Terror Fish, but they were still submerged and Venus had no underwater breathing gear. The air would soon run out without any power. Outside, Marina knew there was plenty of oxygen rich seawater that would enable her to breathe. But was there any air? They would have to wait and see if their captors made a move.

Marina picked up a fallen atomic rifle and handed it to Venus. Venus took the weapon with more than a little revulsion. The two Aquaphibian bodies

that lay on the deck were graphic reminders of how lethal these weapons were. She felt terribly inadequate, standing there in the darkness, wearing only her tattered nightdress and clutching the strange alien weapon.

Suddenly Marina heard something outside. She turned her head, listening. Both girls felt the submarine lurch and begin to move upwards. They reached out to steady themselves against the bulkhead. As the sub broke the surface of the dark waters, the cabin grew a little lighter.

Venus moved to one of the Terror Fish's eye portals and stared out into the gloom. "We seem to be in some kind of huge cave, I think..." The doctor suddenly leapt back in horror as a blinding beam of white light cut through the outer darkness and struck the glass. A searing electrical sound filled the control cabin as a circular section of the portal dissolved, and then thick choking gas poured through the hole.

Venus hacked and coughed. This all seemed so familiar somehow. She was dimly aware of the rifle slipping from her fingers. Her whole body felt numb.

Marina steadied the swaying space doctor, as a grotesque creature stared in through the hole in the eye portal. It held a rifle-like weapon in its green, scaly hands. The creature looked similar to one of Titan's Aquaphibians, except that it was stockier of build and had a fierce determination in its eyes which was lacking in Titan's slave race.

Using her free hand, Marina aimed her rifle at the alien. It wouldn't fire. It was utterly useless.

The creature smashed the remaining glass in the eye portal with the butt of its rifle and stepped into the small cabin, firing its gas gun as it came. Within seconds the cabin was full of the dense, choking smoke.

Venus screamed, and lost consciousness almost immediately as the gas took effect. Marina quickly lowered the space doctor's limp form to the deck, before hurling her useless rifle at their attacker. The alien simply brushed it aside with a snort of contempt. Realising that Marina was immune to the

gas, the creature now fired its laser in her direction. She was forced to dive through the smashed portal and into the darkness beyond to avoid the deadly beams of light.

Marina hit the water some three feet below the level of the shattered eye portal and swam rapidly away into the unknown. She realised that the dark chamber she now found herself in must have been partially drained after they had been ‘swallowed’, and somehow the terror fish had been raised to the surface. That gave Marina some hope. Clearly, their captors did not want Doctor Venus to drown, so it was unlikely that the gas was lethal to humans.

Marina had swum less than a hundred yards from the Terror Fish when she heard a splash behind her. Turning, she saw that the alien was now swimming towards her. Fearfully she dived down into the dark depths, striving to evade her pursuer.

Deep beneath the Pacific Ocean, Titan sat brooding in his palace. He glared down at X2-Zero as he entered.

“X2-Zero! How can this be?” Titan demanded. “How is it that the Terraineans have such a weapon of mass destruction — and yet I was not informed?”

“Your Majesty,” pleaded the surface agent, “I had no knowledge of this vessel. I do not understand...”

“You are a fool X2-Zero. The Terraineans have secretly developed a weapon that could spell the end of our civilisation.”

Titan left his throne and stepped down to gaze out of the windows to the ocean beyond. “A dozen of my Mechanical Fish intercepted that behemoth. All were brushed aside and left powerless on the seabed.”

“Mighty Titan...” X2-Zero ventured nervously, “I have more news. A small submarine was found abandoned at the eastern perimeter of the city.”

Titan turned abruptly, now giving X2-Zero his full attention. “And?”

“The submarine was of a type constructed by Aphony’s people. A one person high speed scout craft.”

“Marina!” hissed Titan. “She is the only Pacifican who would dare to come here in secret. Then she has been here spying for the Terraineans. Pacifica will pay dearly for this outrage!”

“But your Majesty, what of the Terraineans?”

“X2-Zero, we must prepare for war. We must destroy the Terraineans; before they destroy all of us.”

Now many light years away, Stingray was hurtling through space trapped in the huge hangars of the alien submarine space craft. Artificial gravity inside the alien vessel removed all sensation of its enormous velocity.

“Getting harder to breathe Phones,” gasped Troy as he sat slumped at the controls. “We’ll have to resort to the oxygen tanks soon if we can’t get the power back on.”

Suddenly both men felt Stingray change her orientation.

“We’re surfacing Skipper,” Phones said in surprise. “I don’t know how but we are surfacing!”

“I can’t see a thing,” Troy complained as they broke the surface. “If only Marina were here. Her eyes are used to...” He stopped abruptly when a dull scraping sound suddenly echoed through the control cabin.

“Troy! There’s someone out there, on the hull...”

Deep in space Fireball XL5 was drawing closer to the two huge alien spacecraft ahead, her powerful engines still delivering maximum thrust.

Steve activated the neutroni radio and contacted Commander Zero at Space City, "Commander, we're entering interceptor range of the two alien ships. We're getting no response to our radio calls."

"Okay, Steve, any sign of the other cra..."

The radio spluttered briefly and then fell silent.

"Come in Space City. Come in Space City." Steve repeated, trying to re-establish contact with Earth, but the radio remained silent.

"No good Steve," Matt called over the ship's intercom. "Something is jamming the neutroni... I'm trying to pinpoint the source of the trouble."

As the Professor made careful adjustments to his instruments, an ominous image slowly took shape on his screen. "Steve! Another of those ships just appeared on the astroscope! Extreme range and directly behind us. It's closing fast!"

"Then I guess it's time to start evening-up the odds," Steve said grimly, as he readied the interceptors.

On both sides of the ship's nosecone, hatches swung open and racks of missiles slid out into firing position.

"Okay Robert, one, five-zero red. Fire interceptors one and two!"

There was no reply from Robert. Steve glanced across to his robot co-pilot. To his horror he saw Robert's head was slumped to one side, his claw hands still locked to the steering control.

"Robert!" he exclaimed and then turned his attention to firing the missiles himself. His console was completely dead.

Steve suddenly became very aware that he could no longer hear Fireball's engines; the engines that seconds ago had been screaming with power.

“Matt!” he called to the intercom, but it was useless. Fireball had lost all power. Steve felt a sickening feeling in his stomach as he began to float upward from his seat in a now weightless environment.

Oblivious to the plight of Fireball XL5, deep in the gloomy darkness of the alien space-sub’s cavernous hold, the Stingray crew had troubles of their own.

“Phones, keep your eyes peeled. I’m going out there,” Troy ordered urgently as he headed for Stingray’s upper hatch. “And have your gun ready!”

“Sure thing Skipper.” Phones drew his gun and moved over to the windows, listening for more sounds of their unknown visitor.

Troy began turning the wheel that manually opened the upper hatch of the sub. “See anything Phones?” he called as he began to inch open the hatch.

“No Troy... can’t see a thing. It’s so dark... Wait!” Phones raised his gun as he saw the hideous face of an Aquaphibian leering back at him from the other side of the glass. The figure was aiming a rifle-like gun. “Troy! Starboard hull - he’s armed!”

A ray sprang from the alien’s gun, burning into the glass.

All of a sudden, the alien creature stopped and swung around, firing lances of brilliant white light into the dark waters.

“Now Troy!” Phones yelled.

Troy quickly swung open the hatch and fired half a dozen shots at the alien. It fell into the waters with a heavy splash.

Phones hurried up the ladder after Troy. “You got him Troy...”

“Yeah.... I think I did.... but it’s so dark out there. I could see the light of that crazy gun of his. He was shooting at something in the water....”

“Yeah... he sure was in a temper, and boy was he ugly!”

“Suffering space fish!” Steve thought to himself as he floated inside the control cabin of Fireball XL5. “Must get the magnetic boots.”

Back in the navigation bay, Professor Matic was thinking much the same thing as he bounced across the ceiling. “No power... that’s crazy... battery supply should have switched in...”

Seizing a wall bracket with both hands Matt began hauling himself along, trying to check the many gauges and dials. They all told him one thing; XL5 was completely without power. “Guess I’ll need some tools...” he muttered as he opened up a locker and carefully pulled out a large spanner.

Steve was fastening his special magnetic boots. They would allow him to move around much more effectively in the weightless environment. But where could he go? He kicked the doors in frustration. They were jammed solid. It was an airtight seal.

He quickly checked every console in Fireball Junior’s cabin. “Nothing... not a single volt of electricity...” He stood by his control chair, casting an anxious glance at the millions of stars ahead of him. Although there was no sensation of movement, and only the sound of his own breathing, Steve knew Fireball was still at top speed, hurtling through space. “If I can’t get the retro rockets to fire we’ve had it...”

A dull clanging noise suddenly attracted his attention. He listened carefully, then crouching down he pressed one ear to the deck. “It must be Matt! He’s tapping out something in the space code...”

Professor Matic waited anxiously in the darkness with only the faint light of stars from the portholes providing any illumination. He clutched the spanner in his hand, as he waited to see if Steve had heard his tapped out

message. He didn't have to wait long, he soon heard the faint ringing noise of Steve tapping out his reply.

"Well, that's one thing we don't have to worry about." Matt thought to himself. "No sign of the aliens; they've left us for dead. But with no power... I guess we've had it."

Matt reached inside a maintenance hatch and pulled the emergency hydraulic release lever. "That'll take care of the doors..."

Over in Fireball's cockpit Steve almost jumped as the cabin doors hissed open. He immediately hurried back towards the navigation bay, his magnetic boots clanging against the deck. "Well done Matt!"

Matt was standing beside a porthole, peering at a space chart in his hands. He looked up absently, "Thanks Steve..."

"What happened to the power Professor?"

Matt didn't reply for almost a minute, he was busy making mental calculations. "Steve we're in big trouble."

"Yeah... I noticed. How can we get the power back on?"

"We can't Steve. Nothing works; main power, emergency batteries, lighting... why even my wrist watch has stopped working."

"And my ray gun," added Steve. "It's a good thing those aliens didn't try to board us..."

"Might have been better if they had Steve", Matt pointed at his chart, "We are at maximum speed... no way of slowing down... and we are headed directly towards a star!"

Perhaps it was imagination, but Steve was sure that the navigation bay wasn't as dark as it was when he'd first entered, and it was a little warmer...

Marina was swimming furiously. She had to escape the Aquaphibian-like creature if she was to stand any chance of rescuing Doctor Venus and escaping from this alien place.

The creature was still following her. She could sense it getting closer even though she was swimming as fast as she could. She'd been forced to swim near the surface to use what little light there was. Her eyes could normally see quite clearly at great depths but here there was no light at all below fifty feet — nothing to give off the natural luminescence found in the deep ocean trenches she was familiar with. She was beginning to tire when a fantastic sight gave her new hope — Stingray!

Marina surfaced and swam towards the supersub only to be met by a barrage of energy bolts that cut through the darkness like lightning. Another creature was standing on Stingray's hull firing down at her!

She dived to avoid being hit by the deadly rays only to see her pursuer almost upon her. Frantically Marina swam beneath Stingray's hull to use the sub as a shield. She heard the muffled sound of gun shots from above and then a heavy splash brought the body of the other creature into the water beside her, but this one was dead!

Marina quickly grabbed the rifle-like weapon floating beside the body and fired it at her pursuer — and missed!

Still gripping the weapon Marina managed to climb up onto Stingray's hull and turned to fire a second time before the creature could follow. This time the deadly beam hit it and punched a grisly hole right through its green chest.

A second dead creature now floated beside Stingray.

“Marina,” gasped Troy, shocked disbelief on his face.

She ran joyfully into her captain's arms.

Having greeted Troy and Phones, Marina turned and pointed out into the darkness.

“What is it Marina?” Troy asked peering into the blackness, “More of those creatures?”

She shook her head.

“Gee Skipper,” Phones said in exasperation, “if only Marina could talk. Sure is a pity that translator gadget of hers is as dead as all the other equipment.”

“Yeah...” Troy agreed, “Good job our guns still work.”

Marina tugged at Troy’s sleeve and gestured again.

Troy looked into her troubled face, “Marina, are you telling us there’s a danger out there?”

Again Marina shook her head, this time more vigorously.

“Phones, you stay here and watch for trouble. I’m getting my wetsuit and breathing gear and going out there.”

Marina was now nodding, which at least meant she approved of Troy’s decision.

Aboard Fireball XL5, Steve and Matt were trying desperately to come up with a plan of action.

“Matt, we have to get the power back on. If we could only fire the retros...”

“It’s no good Steve.” Matt sounded weary. “The atomic motors are dead and so are all the emergency batteries...” He frowned. “...Now what could do that...”

“Must’ve been some kind of ray from those aliens,” Steve suggested.

Matt continued as if in a conversation of his own, “Yeah... atomic reactions... all stopped... it must be some kind of nuclear retardant, it’s stopped the nuclear reactions.”

“But all our power is atomic Matt... Even the thruster packs and jetmobiles have atomic power cells.”

“Power cells!” Matt snapped his fingers. “Why, that’s the answer Steve!”

“It is?”

Matt rushed out of the navigation bay, almost tripping in his heavy boots. “C’mon Steve. Gotta get to the lab... We can rig up a chemical battery.”

“What good will that do us Matt?” Steve called after him as he followed the scientist down the corridor.

“I reckon we can rig something to fire the interceptor missiles... They’re still ready for launching...”

“But Matt, firing the missiles won’t slow us down much at this speed.”

“Nope, they won’t slow us down. But I’m hoping the recoil might make a slight change to our course that just might buy us some time.”

A full moon shone down upon the blue-grey hull of a huge World Navy submarine, as it lay drifting in the Pacific Ocean.

“Mon dieu! That was one close shave!” Captain Jordan stood on the deck of the Atlantis, all about him his crew were taking in lungfuls of sweet fresh air.

“Thank the stars the manual pumps worked and we were able to surface — eventually...” his exec agreed. “If we’d gone down much deeper...”

“Oui, the hull would have been crushed like an eggshell... But I think we have little reason to thank the stars. Whatever that... that thing was...”

Jordan pointed upwards to the bright stars above “... it came from out there... Somewhere in space.”

A short time later Commander Zero received an urgent telephone call from the World Navy.

“Listen Ninety,” Commander Zero said quickly as he put down the telephone. “That was Admiral Beatty. The navy sub Atlantis has been found. It was hit by some kind of nuclear damping weapon. All her atomic power was neutralized. Lucky for them they managed to surface.”

“Sir, if the same weapon was used on XL5...”

“Yeah...” Zero nodded. “At full power she’ll be out of control. They’ll have no way to slow her down or even send out a distress signal...”

Lieutenant Ninety was checking the locations of nearby patrol ships, “It’ll be hours before the nearest ship gets to the area sir. Let me take Fireball XL1. Steve’s gonna need help fast.”

“Okay Ninety. Find yourself a co-pilot.” As Lieutenant Ninety hurriedly left the Control Room, the Commander sounded the general alarm. “Attention launch crews. Prepare Fireball XL1 for emergency launch!”