

Chapter 6

Breathing Space

In Fireball XL5's laboratory, Steve Zodiac watched as Professor Matic hastily improvised a chemical battery. How long before they plunged headlong into the star that was waiting for them? He hated the inactivity, but the lab was Matt's domain, and he wasn't much help here.

Matt wiped his brow, "Almost finished this one Steve."

Reaching for a container of acid, he accidentally sent it spinning across the room in the weightless environment.

"Careful Matt!" Steve shouted, grabbing the flask with both hands as it sailed past him. He handed it back to Matt.

"Er... thanks. It's so dark... can hardly see a darn thing. Pass me one of those flashlights from the locker over there."

"Won't do you much good Matt, they won't work." Steve picked up a flashlight and brought it back to the Professor. "Just like all our other electrical gear, useless."

"Not when I connect up this battery. Remove the atomic power cell."

Steve hesitated. "Is that safe?"

"Sure Steve, it'll be totally deactivated."

Steve gingerly opened up the outer casing, and pulled out the power cell. He put it carefully into a cabinet. Years of training and experience had taught him never to leave loose objects floating around in zero G.

In a few moments Matt had his battery installed in the flashlight and the lab was flooded with a dazzling light.

“Now,” he said with satisfaction, “we’ll rig up another battery to ignite the interceptors and we’ll be all set. Er, we’ll have to connect the cables directly to the missiles...”

Steve nodded. “We can’t use thruster packs without power, so we’ll need safety lines and harnesses. I’ll go get them.”

“Fine Steve, I’ll have this gadget ready in five minutes, and meet you in Junior’s starboard missile bay.”

“It’s a good thing we’ve got the oxygen pills,” Steve said as he headed for the door. “Spacesuits would be as useless as the ship’s motors. I guess we use atomic power for everything these days.”

“Yeah... oxygen pills,” Matt muttered as he worked. “We have enough to keep us alive for maybe a week...”

“How’s that Matt?” Steve asked turning back towards the professor. “There’s plenty of air in the tanks. We can use the manual pumps, and we’ve got enough food pills for months.”

“That’s true enough Steve. But without power, this ship will cool down rapidly, and without oxygen pills for protection, we’ll freeze to death.”

“What a tootie I am...” Steve sighed.

“I guess we’ve both got something else on our minds...” Matt said quietly.

“Yeah... We’d both give our lives to save Venus; and we’re dying for nothing... One way or another I guess we’ve had it this time.” Steve sighed with frustration, “We’ll die from the cold... Assuming we don’t burn up in that star first...”

“While there’s life there’s hope,” Matt said firmly.

Steve forced a smile, “You’re right Matt. We’ll find a way out of all this; and we’ll find Venus too.”

“Better hurry Steve... I reckon we have about fifteen minutes to get those missiles fired — otherwise nothing will stop this ship turning into a real fireball.”

Trillions of miles from Earth, three huge sinister alien submarine spaceships streaked onwards through the starry void. Inside the cavernous hold of one of the ships Troy and Marina had just climbed aboard the terror fish submarine.

Troy gasped when he saw the dead bodies, “Well I guess these two Aquaphibians won’t bother us... Looks like they were shot.”

Marina nodded and pointed to herself, and then back to the Aquaphibians lying on the deck.

“They had you prisoner I guess,” Troy said, trying to piece together the puzzle, “but who rescued you?”

Marina shook her head and made signs with her hand to indicate she’d shot the Aquaphibians herself.

“You did this? Well done Marina.” Troy looked around, cautiously sniffing the air, “Doesn’t smell too good in here... no sense in hanging around. Guess we’d better get back to Phones now.”

Marina grabbed Troy’s arm and started frantically looking around in the darkness.

“But what are we looking for Marina? What’s so important?”

Marina thought for a long moment and then picked up a piece of the shattered eye port glass and breathed on it. Carefully she traced out a pattern with her finger.

“Say, what you are drawing Marina.... A circle... And a cross... Heck that’s the symbol for Venus...”

Marina nodded and pointed to a pile of ropes in the corner of the cabin, and then back to the symbol she’d drawn on the glass.

“She was here? Doctor Venus was here?” Troy saw the pain on Marina’s face and knew he’d understood.

Phones was standing guard on Stingray’s upper hull, his WASP pistol held at the ready, as he waited for Troy and Marina to return. They had been gone for less than half an hour, but it felt like an eternity to the hydrophone operator. He had changed into his wet suit in case he had to abandon the supersub in a hurry; which wasn’t a pleasant thought in this dark, alien environment.

Suddenly he heard a splash behind him. He spun around but could not see a thing in the darkness. His heart pounded as he squinted to see what had made the noise. “Troy, Marina. Is that you?” Phones called, nervously, but no one answered.

His pistol at the ready, Phones moved cautiously around on Stingray’s hull. He heard another splash and turned to see one of the Aquaphibian creatures behind him with its weapon raised. Phones was enveloped in a cloud of choking gas before he could take aim, but he still managed to fire off two shots before he lost consciousness; both missed their target...

“Phones!” Troy exclaimed as he heard the distant sound of gunfire. “Marina, we’ve gotta help him!”

Troy and Marina plunged back into the inky waters beside the Terror Fish and began swimming back through the darkness towards Stingray.

Doctor Venus opened her eyes and quickly shut them again because the light was so bright. Where was she? The last she remembered was being rescued by Marina and... then it all came flooding back to her. So the gas was not deadly after all. She opened her eyes again, but gradually this time, to let them acclimatize to the brightness. She could see an arc lamp suspended above her, and surrounding it were a variety of what appeared to be surgical instruments. With cold clarity Venus realised she was on some kind of alien operating table, and she could not move her arms or legs.

For a moment other memories came flooding back. Steve had once saved her from being sacrificed to a sun god on some far-flung world. She’d been tied to an altar; to await the magnified rays of an alien sun. Steve had saved her.... with Zoonie’s help. “Zoonie!” she almost shouted out aloud as she thought of her pet lazone. For a moment her concerns were for him. Was he still alive? A movement above her brought her mind back to her predicament with a jolt. A claw like instrument was snaking silently down towards her, as if it were some monstrous metallic tentacle.

“Run! Run!” wailed Zoonie over Fireball XL1’s open intercom in the control cabin of the ship, “Zoonie run, Zoonie run!”

“What the heck’s up with that creature?” Sergeant Mahoney asked, with more than a little irritation in his voice.

“I’d better go back and check, he’s possibly still in some kind of shock.” said Lieutenant Ninety.

“Shock? Why that thing’s just an animal Lieutenant. Beats me why you brought it along with us.”

“I’ve told you Mahoney, lazoon are telepathic. He may help us find Doctor Venus and maybe the Colonel and the Professor too...”

“Fat chance!” Mahoney spat. “How in the world could he tell us which way to fly a spaceship?”

Lieutenant Ninety was a little tired of explaining. He headed for the door. “Sooner or later, Sergeant, we’ll catch up with XL5, then we’ll track those aliens to whatever planet they are heading for. Zoonie will help us.”

“Right.” Mahoney replied sceptically. “You’re a brilliant officer to be sure.”

Ninety fumed as he made his way back through the ship. Mahoney was a senior Security Officer at Space City, and would not have been his first choice of co-pilot. But an immediate launch had meant he couldn’t afford to wait for someone better qualified.

Ninety opened the door to the room where Zoonie was being kept, “Hey, settle down fellah, don’t worry.” Zoonie ran to him whimpering. Ninety knelt beside the lazoon and took his paws in his hands.

“Easy Zoonie, it’ll be okay. We’ll find them - you and me.”

Back on Earth, in the undersea city of Titanica, Titan had made his plans...

“X2-Zero, attend my words.”

“Yes oh Mighty Titan,” the surface agent acknowledged.

“I will pay a visit to the city of Pacifica — the domain of Aphony.”

“But Mighty Titan...”

“Silence!” commanded Titan. “I am aware that the fool does not trust me. However, I will arrive at Pacifica alone and unarmed. He will admit me. He will be curious as to my motives.”

X2-Zero nodded humbly, resisting the temptation to interrupt again.

Titan continued, “It is time to form an undersea Alliance against the Terraineans. Aphony will join us; as will his peace-loving friends.”

The undersea ruler paused, “Well?”

“Oh, er, a most cunning plan your Majesty,” X2-Zero grovelled. “How will you deceive Aphony into siding with you?”

“Imbecile! This is no deception. We have proof that the Terraineans are preparing to invade our oceans, to conquer our cities and enslave our peoples!” Titan pondered for a moment, “I shall take a gift...The old fool likes books. I have just the book to ensure my plan cannot fail. Pacifica will help us, X2-Zero, one way or another...”

Steve Zodiac and Professor Matic were making a check of their safety lines as they stood in XL5’s starboard missile bay. The hatch was wide open to space and four interceptor missiles sat on their extended launch cradle.

“Now be careful Matt! Without thruster packs there’s no way to move around out there except for crawling along the missile rack.”

“Sure Steve, we can’t even use magnetic boots. They could upset the missiles...”

“Yeah,” agreed Steve, “And we sure don’t want to upset those babies!”

“Don’t worry Steve. It’ll be a cinch.” Matt gave his safety line a final test tug and inched his way out of the hatch. About his waist he’d tied various tools for the task at hand.

Steve followed, carrying the flashlight over his shoulder and trailing four detonator fuses behind him. The oxygen pills they'd taken would allow them to survive in open space for an hour or so and they would only be out there for ten minutes. That's all the time they had to launch the missiles, and stop XL5's headlong plunge into a star.

Matt was soon kneeling beside the first missile, "Okay Steve, give me some light over here. Good," the professor said, as Steve arrived at his side, "hold the light just there." Matt grabbed his spanner and prepared to strike the missile with it.

"Hey!" Steve called in alarm. "Matt be careful!"

"It's okay Steve." Matt gave the missile's dorsal fin a hefty swipe with his spanner. "That ought to do it." He rubbed his arm. "They're making the confounded things tougher these days!"

"When you said you had to adjust the firing angle..." Steve started to say, once his breathing returned.

"We had to do that kind of thing a lot back in the space pioneer days Steve. Hook up a fuse and we'll get the other three missiles ready."

With less than two minutes to spare before they passed the point of no return, all four interceptors had been realigned, and fuses had been attached.

Steve and Matt hurriedly hauled themselves back into XL5's starboard missile bay and strapped themselves to the superstructure. "Fire the missiles Matt," Steve said urgently, "before it's too late!"

Matt pressed a button on his hastily improvised battery-pack... and nothing happened. "One of the cables must be loose!" He told Steve as he hurriedly tightened the push connector on his battery, and pressed the button again.

This time the circuit closed, sending a pulse of electricity down the cables to each missile.

“Keep your head down Steve,” yelled Matt as three missiles hurtled from their launch cradles, dangerously close to the astronauts.

The three interceptors exploded simultaneously in a blaze of energy.

“You’ve done it, Matt” gasped Steve, feeling as if he had been kicked repeatedly by a Martian mule.

“I’m... I’m not so sure Steve...” Matt was finding it difficult to think, let alone speak, “Only... three missiles... launched.”

“Will that do it Matt?”

“Don’t know Steve. Gotta get back to the navigation bay... do some figuring.”

Troy and Marina were still swimming back towards Stingray, keeping near to the surface to make the most of the dim light in the vast chamber. Troy envied the way Marina seemed to move effortlessly through the water. His own limbs were beginning to tire with the exertion. He knew he’d slowed down a little even though he was desperately trying to reach Phones as quickly as he could. If only the Seabugs had been operational, he could have covered the distance in no time.

Marina seemed to sense Troy’s thoughts, or perhaps she’d noticed he was beginning to tire. She turned gracefully in the water and reached out to touch him on the shoulder. Having gained his attention she pointed to the alien rifle she carried. Then she gestured ahead in the direction of Stingray, still a long way out of sight.

Troy knew immediately what Marina intended. She could easily swim much faster than he could. Water was her natural environment, but he was only

human. Phones was in trouble...Troy remembered the two dead Aquaphibians in the Terror Fish and how Marina had shot the space alien that had pursued her. She was a courageous and capable member of the WASP.

Troy pointed upwards and they both swam to the surface so that Troy could speak. He quickly pulled his face-mask up out of the way. "Okay Marina — go on ahead. I'll follow as fast as I can." He briefly touched the girl's hand, "Marina... don't take chances..."

Marina nodded and without a moment's hesitation vanished into the watery depths.

Troy repositioned his face-mask, suddenly feeling very alone. He dived back down into the cool blackness and began swimming as fast as his aching body would move him, his mind wrestling with finding a way to hit back at the aliens and escape. Where were they now? Had the space-sub left Earth? Or were they still somewhere in the depths of the Pacific Ocean? More urgently, was Phones okay? He had to force himself not to question whether he'd made bad decisions. The important thing was to keep a clear head. His life, and the lives of his crew, hung in the balance.

Long minutes passed and then Troy saw that he was drawing near to Stingray. He surfaced once more, his eyes and ears straining for information. He could make out Stingray's familiar silhouette in the distance, but there was no sign of Phones or Marina.

A sudden movement caught his attention, and he turned to see two dark shadowy forms moving silently through the water towards him. He drew his gun and his finger tightened on the trigger. Was it Marina and Phones, he wondered, or was it more of those hideous alien creatures?

“Do you want the good news or the bad news first, Steve?” asked Matt after pouring over the results of numerous readings he had taken with an ancient sextant from XL5’s astrodome above central control.

“Come on Matt, just tell me.”

“Well the interceptors blasted us away from the star alright.”

“That’s boss, Matt.”

“Don’t get too excited, Steve. We have bought ourselves some time, but not much.” Matt drew a diagram in his notebook.

“Fireball will swing around the star at high velocity, but the gravitational pull will slow us up... rather abruptly — and we don’t have the artificial gravity to compensate...”

“We can take the emergency high acceleration drugs Matt. They’ll knock us out but at least we’ll survive the g-forces.”

“What we won’t survive, is collision with the fifth planet in the star’s system...” Matt drew a smooth arc around the star he’d drawn and added a large cross at the end of it. “There’s nothing we can do Steve. It’s simple celestial mechanics; velocity, gravitation, momentum - all adding up to Fireball running smack into a planet. We’ll be travelling so fast we won’t even have time to burn up in the atmosphere.”