

Chapter 7

With Friends Like These...

Fireball XLS's medical laboratory looked dark and foreboding to Steve Zodiac, as he paused in the open doorway. In the cold silent gloom he felt he could almost glimpse Venus at work, peering into a microscope or examining the contents of a test tube. But Venus wasn't here. Would he ever see her alive again? Steve swallowed and forced himself to concentrate as he stepped into the room, the beam from his flashlight sending stark black shadows dancing about him. His heavy magnetic boots echoed noisily with each step. Reaching up to a wall cabinet, the Colonel carefully took out a hypodermic syringe and two small vials of liquid. As he turned back to the door, his flashlight briefly illuminated the professor, who stood waiting outside. Seeing Matt's sorrowful expression, Steve realised that his friend had been worrying about Venus too. He broke the silence, "How long before Fireball starts to slow up Matt?"

The Professor thought for a moment and then cleared his throat. "Well, I guess the star's gravitational pull is already having a braking effect, but we won't notice anything for about thirty minutes, and then, boy, are we gonna notice!"

"Yeah," Steve agreed, "if we don't take these drugs the G-forces will squash us flatter than Martian pancakes." He carefully carried the medication back to the door, moving slowly in the weightless conditions. "When this stuff hits us it'll knock us out cold for five or six hours..."

Matt shrugged, "I guess we'll wake up just in time to get a good up-close view of that planet... Just before we smash right into it."

“While there’s life there’s hope Matt,” Steve reminded the Professor. “C’mon, let’s go back up to the control cabin. We’ll take our little nap strapped into the seats.” Steve didn’t say it, but if he was going to die, then he wanted to die at the controls of his ship.

In the eerie darkness of the hold of the alien submarine spacecraft, Troy steadied his aim as the two swimmers approached.

A woman’s voice abruptly broke the silence, “Captain! Captain Tempest! Don’t shoot! It’s me, Doctor Venus! Marina is with me!”

“Doctor Venus?” Troy called back as he hastily holstered his pistol, and began swimming to meet the two girls. As he drew closer, Troy could see that Venus was wearing WASP underwater breathing gear.

“Thank goodness you are here Captain!” Venus exclaimed as she joined Troy with Marina at her side. “I was with Lieutenant Sheridan on your submarine. He was captured by Aquaphibians... I didn’t have a gun...”

“Thank goodness you’re safe Doctor.” Troy wondered if ‘safe’ was the right word, but it seemed the right thing to say. “We’ll find Phones. Which way did the Aquaphibians take him?”

“They put the Lieutenant into some kind of bag and went back under the water... I put on the Lieutenant’s air tanks and followed them as they dived. There’s a hatch on the floor of this chamber. It’s almost directly below us...”

Troy marvelled at how Venus could get her bearings in the awful darkness. There was a splash and Marina had dived beneath the surface. A minute went by as Troy and Venus waited, then Marina surfaced again, nodding her head vigorously.

“Doctor,” Troy said quickly, “you’d better wait aboard Stingray. Marina and I will go after Phones.”

“No Captain,” Venus replied firmly, “I’m coming with you. I am a member of the World Space Patrol. Danger is my business too. Besides, I don’t think your vessel can be considered a safe haven.”

Fireball XL1 coasted through space at tremendous velocity, following XL5’s last known heading. Lieutenant Ninety had waited until the last possible moment before shutting down the nutomic hyperdrive motors to avoid them burning out — or exploding.

Ninety now sat in the patrol ship’s navigation bay, scanning the surrounding space sky with the astroscope and other instruments, looking for any sign of the missing Fireball XL5. He was still clinging to the hope that Steve and Matt were alive, and that he could help them. It was a hope that was not shared by his co-pilot.

Sergeant Mahoney’s voice continued to drone over the intercom. His Irish burr was really beginning to irritate Ninety. He was expressing his opinion, as he had been doing with increasing frequency during their flight. “I still say we are wasting our time out here... sir. Face it Lieutenant, we’ve lost XL5 and the alien ships. There’s not a thing we can do about it. We should abandon the search.”

“No, Sergeant. We keep searching until we find them.” Ninety hit the intercom button harder than necessary to cut the connection. He was not prepared to give up on XL5 and her crew. He owed Steve his life and would never be able to forgive himself if he had to leave the Colonel drifting out in space to die. A little reluctantly, Ninety reached out a hand to activate the neutroni radio to make his routine report to Space City. He hesitated, what if Commander Zero ordered him to abandon the search?

Aboard the vast alien space-sub, Troy, Marina and Venus were swimming along close to the floor of their prison, searching for the hatch through which Phones had been taken. Marina led the way, pausing now and again to make sure the others were following. The suit radios didn't work, so Troy and Venus made sure they stayed close together in case they got separated in the darkness.

Marina waved a hand and pointed. Troy couldn't see clearly, but he could feel the shape of a wheeled mechanism set on a raised metallic projection. He wasted no time in turning the wheel. A panel began to slide back and light flooded outwards illuminating the three swimmers.

Troy glanced back at the two girls. He was surprised to see that Venus wasn't wearing any clothes. "No time for star gazing," he told himself, again looking down into the lighted hatchway. He gestured to the others to wait as he cautiously lowered himself feet first into the opening. He'd seen enough airlocks in his career to recognize this for one. He beckoned Marina and Venus to follow, pointing meaningfully at his gun. No telling what would be waiting on the other side of the airlock door.

Marina followed Troy and Venus, swimming down into a small chamber, her rifle at the ready. At a gesture from Troy she reached up and closed the hatch by turning another wheel set into the wall behind her. Machinery hummed into life and the water level rapidly fell as it was pumped out of the airlock.

"Let's hope the air is breathable..." Troy thought to himself as he reached up to remove his face mask. He glanced over at Marina. She seemed okay, and she nodded to him as if in reply to his unspoken question. Out of the water she needed air to breathe just as he did.

Venus started to take off her own mask, but Troy reached out a hand and stopped her. He lifted his own mask a little, and cautiously sniffed the air. It smelt good enough. "Okay Doctor," he said as he took the mask off.

“Seems okay.” He began taking off the rest of his underwater gear. “Sure seems bright in here...”

“Your eyes are just adjusting to the different light levels Captain,” Venus told him as she removed her own oxygen tanks.

Troy was suddenly very aware of the Doctor’s lack of clothing. He hurriedly took off his wet suit jacket, “Here Doctor, put this on,” he said turning his head away.

Venus smiled, “Thank you Captain, but that’s not necessary. It’s actually quite warm in here.”

Troy and Marina exchanged an anxious look. Marina took the jacket and helped Venus to put it on.

“Maybe she’s in shock?” Troy wondered to himself.

“What happened to your clothes Doctor?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

Venus shrugged, “I’m afraid I wasn’t dressed for deep sea diving...”

Marina nodded her agreement, and Troy put the question from his mind.

“Doctor Venus, keep behind us, you don’t have a gun. Marina, we shoot first and ask questions later, okay?”

The inner door automatically opened as the last of the water drained away. Ahead lay a flight of metal steps leading downward.

“Okay ladies,” Troy whispered, as he drew his pistol, “I’ll go first. Stay close behind — and be ready for anything.”

The stars were shining brightly in the sky above Space City. A young lieutenant sat at her desk in the semi-darkness of the main control room. She was staring worriedly at the space scanners, and the tiny flashing point of light that represented Fireball XL1’s position. She ran a hand through her

long red hair, forcing herself to concentrate on her work. "I guess they told me this was the hardest part of the job..."

"What was that Lieutenant Drake?" Commander Zero demanded brusquely, glaring over from his console.

"Er... I was just thinking aloud sir."

"Yeah..." Zero responded, his voice softening. "It kinda gets you like that I'm afraid."

"I guess I'll get used to it, sir," the girl said, forcing a smile.

"Maybe," said Zero, getting to his feet, "but I never have. We sit around here, making the decisions. Giving out the orders... While good people are out there risking their necks. We just have to hope that we made the right decisions." The Commander headed towards the door, and then turned, "It's routine that keeps this tower turning. I'll go get some sleep, it's been a long day. Good night Lieutenant."

"Yes sir," the young woman acknowledged as Zero exited, "good night sir." She hurriedly activated the neutroni radio, "Space City to Fireball XL1... Space City to Fireball XL1..."

The neutroni signal reached XL1 instantly, despite the immense distance that now separated the ship from Earth. Lieutenant Ninety flicked on the navigation bay radio, "Fireball XL1 to Space City... Lieutenant Ninety here. Hey, is that you Elizabeth? I was just about to check in."

"Hello Joe, yeah it's me. I finally made it to the Control Room roster."

"That's great Liz..."

"How goes the search?"

"No luck yet... But we'll find XL5, I know we will."

"Joe, the Commander, he's considering recalling you to base..."

“He can’t! I mean... There are no other ships out here.”

“He’s under pressure to call off the search. I’ll do what I can this end.”

“Thanks Liz, you’re boss.”

“Joe... Take care of yourself, uh?”

“Don’t worry Liz, things will be okay. I know it.”

As Ninety turned off the radio, Mahoney came in carrying a mug of steaming coffee. “Here’s your coffee, Lieutenant.”

“Thanks Sergeant,” Ninety said, gratefully accepting the drink and taking a few gulps.

“By the look of you, sir, you’d best be getting some sleep. I got my eight hours just before we launched.”

Ninety did feel quite drowsy all of a sudden. “Yeah... Guess you’re right Sergeant. I’ll grab a couple of hours and then relieve you. Maintain present course and wake me if there’s the slightest sign of anything out there. And I mean anything.”

“Right you are sir,” Mahoney nodded and left.

Still drinking his coffee, Ninety headed for the door leading aft. He stood for a moment trying to clear his mind. “What am I doing? I can’t go to bed. If I sleep, the next thing I know the Commander will be calling to cancel the search... I’ve gotta keep trying.”

He stifled a yawn as he sat back down at the circular desk. Setting his mug of coffee down beside the astroscope, he began keying in commands. The only significant objects he could see were a few brightly coloured stars — which seemed badly out of focus. As the Lieutenant leaned forward to adjust the image he suddenly collapsed face down on the desk and lay still.

Deep within the alien spacecraft, Troy, Venus and Marina had almost reached the bottom of the metal steps. Troy held his gun ready. His eyes were slowly becoming accustomed to the brighter light, but everything still had a blurred edge. He soon found himself on a catwalk overlooking a large hangar full of alien equipment.

“Hi Skipper,” a familiar voice called, “I’ve been waiting for you...”

“Phones? Thank goodness you’re...” Troy’s words trailed off as he realised that his friend was aiming an alien rifle directly at him. “Phones, what’s...?”

Before Troy could finish his question Phones fired and a stream of toxic gas enveloped him. Dropping his pistol, he fell to the deck gasping for air.

Marina leapt down the last few steps and raised her alien laser rifle at Phones, who smiled back at her as if nothing unusual was happening. Marina didn’t know what to do; she couldn’t shoot Phones. She turned as Doctor Venus stepped onto the catwalk beside her. She was smiling too.

Marina felt she was losing her mind. Frantically she pointed to Troy, indicating that Venus should help him. He was lying on the catwalk, gasping for air and almost unconscious. Then Marina realised that Venus and Phones were both unaffected by the gas, which was now swirling around them. Marina guessed that she must be somehow immune as she was a water breather like the Aquaphibians, but Venus and Phones were Terraineans...

As Marina hesitated, Venus suddenly turned and with surprising strength, wrenched the rifle from the girl’s grasp, and struck her savagely across the temple with it. Marina fell to the deck, beside her unconscious captain.

“Politicians and bureaucrats!” Commander Zero muttered as he pulled on his uniform jacket.

“Pop,” his 10 year old son Jonathan asked excitedly, “can I go to Unity City too?”

“For the last time...” Zero snapped irritably, “NO!”

“Oh, couldn’t you take him dear?” Eleanor Zero asked, “Mother says...”

The telephone rang and Zero snatched it up impatiently, “Zero here.”

“Sam Shore here Wilbur,” the WASP commander announced, sounding almost apologetic.

“Yes Sam?”

“I guess I’ll be seeing you in Unity City in a few hours. Just calling to let you know — the World Navy is blaming the Space Patrol for the ‘incidents’.”

“What?!”

“The World President is out for blood and the World Navy doesn’t want it to be theirs. They say their remit and budget doesn’t cover fighting alien spaceships. They don’t get funded by the United Planets Organisation...”

“Typical!” snorted Zero angrily. “I guess that’s just like the World Navy — passing the blame on to someone else.”

“Yeah, guess so...” Shore said tonelessly, “I’m afraid I have to tell you that the WASP are taking the same line... Sorry Wil, you’re ‘It’.”

Titan sat at the controls of his personal submarine — his royal yacht. The craft had been designed to resemble a large sea-shell. Through the view ports he could see his two mechanical fish escorts. He activated the radio, “Await my return. Do not approach the city of Pacifica, under any circumstances.”

Aquaphibian voices gurgled their response, and the undersea ruler watched as the two Terror Fish peeled off and sank down to the seabed.

“All goes well,” Titan gloated, as he made the last part of his journey alone. As he neared the fantastic shell-like underwater city of Pacifica he activated lights to flash a coded signal. A massive door began to open in one of the undersea buildings. “Good... Good... Soon the peaceful Aphony will be rousing his people to battle.”

Aphony watched with one of his chancellors as Titan’s craft approached. They did not speak. Instead of speech, Aphony’s people had the gift of telepathy, at least between their own kind. Aphony was angry and suspicious. The warlord Titan was not welcome in his city.

Soon Titan was striding confidently into Aphony’s throne room. “Greetings, oh peaceful ruler of Pacifica. Aphony, I have news of your daughter. News of Marina.” Titan spoke almost gleefully and he watched the change in Aphony’s expression with satisfaction. “She has been taken by your friends, the Terraineans. She is, how shall I say it, helping them with their experiments.”

Aphony gestured to his chancellor, who shook his head, and glared back at Titan.

“You doubt me? Allow me to explain. Marina was fleeing from the accursed Terraineans. She sought refuge in the one place that she could be safe.” Titan waved a dismissive hand to indicate Pacifica.

“Not here, but in mighty Titanica. Only there could she be safe; only there would she find strong allies to fight her attackers. But... even as I despatched a shoal of mechanical fish to meet her, she was abducted by a Terrainean submarine — of immense proportions — and taken back to die. I grieve for you Aphony, you have been betrayed. You know I speak the truth, I see it in your face. Though you cannot clearly see my thoughts, you know this is not a deception on my part.”

Aphony nodded, confused. He conferred with his chancellor once more, silently, but obviously very agitated.

Several hours later, tension was running high at an emergency meeting of the World Government at Unity City, Bermuda. The World President sat at a large circular conference table, flanked on either side by the members of the World Security Council — the world’s military chiefs. Facing him across the table were the world’s national leaders.

The European premier was voicing his objections, “But Mister President, we have treaties... agreements...”

The World President waved a hand dismissively. “Those agreements are now void, Prime Minister.” He nodded to one of his aides and then addressed the delegates around the table. “We have information that these undersea creatures are illegal aliens and therefore, not Earth citizens as we were originally led to believe. It is our manifest destiny to properly exploit OUR world. During my twenty-one years as Earth’s President, we have put an end to wars between our nations. We have seen that every man, woman and child on this planet has access to the best education, the best health care, the best nutrition available. This is a true Golden Age for humanity.”

There were many nods and mutterings of agreement from all around the conference table.

“Gentlemen, ladies, our population is expanding, WE need more room. The World Space Patrol has failed to locate further worlds for us to colonize. Commander Zero?”

“Well sir, that’s the situation. We can’t just create planets to order. When we do find a possible planet for colonization it has to be applied for in the United Planets Organization’s Council of Worlds to...”

“To decide which race has the right to exploit that world.” finished the World President. “Here on Earth, WE have the right to OUR OWN planet! We will begin taking action to make our oceans secure. This will involve the

movement of undersea alien populations to restricted zones. Meanwhile the areas they vacate will be put to productive use - our use.”

“But Mister President...” A half dozen people around the table protested.

The President stared icily at each objector in turn and they fell silent. “I have the entire world under my protection, ladies and gentlemen. I take my duty very seriously, very seriously indeed.” He snapped his fingers and his aide began handing files of papers to each delegate at the meeting. “We have evidence that the races living beneath our seas are nothing less than a spearhead for invasion.”

“This is incredible!” gasped the Chinese President. “Why did we not suspect...”

The World President shrugged. “We took them at their word. The recent unprovoked attack on our naval vessels by an alien submarine spacecraft is only the beginning. A pre-emptive strike to test our defences...”

He cast a glance at the uniformed men seated beside him, “...which proved sadly lacking. It is clear from the enemy craft’s movements that it was somehow connected with Titanica...”

“I should point out sir, that the Navy submarine Atlantis was recovered with all hands...” Admiral Beatty stated. “But the WASP submarine, Stingray, was apparently destroyed, or captured.”

“Commander Shore?” The World President prompted.

“The evidence indicates that Stingray was captured, along with her crew...”

The President raised a hand, “And I’m sure I don’t have to remind anyone here that Stingray was our world’s most advanced submarine — and our first line of defence against hostile undersea races. That technology is now very likely being retro-engineered in Titanica.”

“Stingray is a prototype vessel Mister President,” Shore protested. “We’ll have four more like her on patrol within a few months.”

“With no disrespect to yourself Commander Shore, nor to the World Aquanaut Security Patrol,” the World President looked across to Admiral Beatty, head of the World Navy, “this is a job for the World Navy. The WASP has proved time and time again that it is an effective police force but this shift in the balance of power requires a tough response. Therefore, the World Navy will be charged with the task of producing heavily armed submarines, capable of operating in the deepest parts of the world’s oceans.”

In a very deep part of the Pacific Ocean, Aphony, leader of the undersea city of Pacifica was very troubled. Titan had left a book, a gift from one leader to another. It was at least one hundred years old, ‘How the West Was Won’.

Aphony could read many languages, including many of those used by the surface people. This book detailed how the Terraineans took land that they wanted by force or by deception. The normally peaceful man was very angry and concerned. His only daughter, Marina, was now a captive of the people he once trusted. He had heard enough reports from other undersea peoples to know that Titan spoke the truth. The surface dwellers, the Terraineans, were planning to take over the oceans and his people would suffer greatly. There would be war. Titan was their only hope. He tried to marshal his thoughts and failed. Marina — was she still alive?

Lieutenant Ninety slowly became aware of a steady beeping sound. He struggled to wake up from a deep sleep. When he opened his eyes he was surprised to find that he was sitting in Fireball XL1’s navigation bay. He glanced at his watch; he’d been asleep for almost five hours. A message was

flashing urgently on the astroscope screen: 'Element Located'. Ninety adjusted the instrument carefully. There were traces of a recent explosion. The young lieutenant was immediately fully awake. The astroscope was picking up traces of calhelium - the special metal used in the construction of the Fireball fleet.

"Interceptor missile residue!" he exclaimed.

He hurriedly switched on the intercom. "Mahoney, change course to four, four, six zero-red, and fire the main boosters!"

Lieutenant Drake sat at her desk in Space City's Control Tower, glancing up at the sector map where Fireball XL1's last reported position was indicated.

"Space City to Fireball XL1... Please respond... Space City to Fireball XL1, please respond..." She waited for a few more moments before ending the transmission. Lieutenant Ninety hadn't made the routine check-in calls. She knew Joe quite well, she'd been dating him for months now. Was he deliberately staying out of contact in order to avoid a recall order? She wasn't sure. She was alone in the control room. Commander Zero was still at Unity City. She could call a senior officer and ask what to do, but she resisted the idea. She'd been trained to follow strict procedures in this kind of situation. Log the lack of contact, press on with other matters. A few missed check-ins and a period of lost contact did not necessarily indicate trouble. Patrol ships were too few and far between to send them haring off every time a radio malfunctioned or a crew were too engrossed in their mission to waste precious time on a check-in call. Besides, there were no other ships in the area. She dutifully logged the problem and began checking patrol schedules. She'd been warned against having a patrol ship officer as a boyfriend. It was a tough job. But Joe wasn't supposed to be out there... He was ground staff just as she was. "Get a grip," she told herself.

“One day Liz Drake may be out there performing a vital rescue mission... if she can handle the stress.”

A voice from the radio almost made her jump. “Fireball XL20 to Space City...”

“Uh, er, Space City receiving. Go ahead XL20.”

Aboard Fireball XL1, Lieutenant Ninety studied the data he'd been pulling from the ship's navigational computers. He'd had to make so many assumptions. If XL5 had maintained its last course... If XL5 had been drawn towards this particular star and not another... If that interceptor blast had deflected the ship's course... He'd narrowed down the possible location of XL5 to a volume of space surrounding a small G-type star, twelve planets and nearly a cubic light year of empty space. He was looking for anomalies, but empty space was seldom really empty, particularly this near to a star. On his instructions the navigational computers were analysing every ship sized mass, checking spectral emissions, angular momentum, looking for the needle in the celestial haystack.

“That must be XL5,” Ninety muttered as he swung the console around to tap into the auxiliary tracking computers. A moment later he spoke hurriedly into the ship's intercom, “Okay Mahoney, set course three, one, five zero-blue and give her all she's got! I think we've found them!”

“Acknowledged Lieutenant. Course set... Firing boosters...”

Fireball XL1 surged forward on its new heading. Ninety watched the astroscope as XL1 closed in on the target. “Mahoney, if that is XL5 she's moving fast... I don't like the look of the trajectory... It looks as if they're on collision course with a planet!”

“We're closing fast Lieutenant,” Mahoney called over the intercom, “We are at full power.”

“It is them!” Lieutenant Ninety exclaimed as the unmistakable image of a Fireball class patrol ship began to grow on the astroscope screen. “I’m coming forward... Keep a close eye on the readings; they may eject.”

As Ninety ran down the main corridor he felt despair welling up inside him. They would be too late; he knew it. Without power the crew couldn’t even eject let alone change course.

“There they are Lieutenant!” Mahoney exclaimed as Ninety entered the control cabin.

Directly ahead loomed the huge crescent shape of a planet and as Ninety stared intently he could see a bright point of light was rapidly drawing closer to it. He hastily scrambled into the pilot’s seat and grabbed the controls. “More power!”

“No good sir, that’s all we’ve got. They won’t make it.”

Fireball XL5 had followed the course that Matt had predicted. Caught in the star’s immense gravitational field, her velocity had decreased sharply.

Steve and Matt sat side by side in the control cabin, still a little groggy from the effects of the drug. They were staring ahead, at the unknown planet fate had placed them on a collision course with. Only half an hour ago it had been difficult to spot with the naked eye, and now it was the size of a beach ball, and getting bigger all the time.

With Fireball’s motors still powerless, their only hope of survival had depended on using the remaining interceptor missiles to change their angle of approach, and bounce off the planet’s atmosphere. But now they were close enough to see that there was no atmosphere. It was an airless, frozen world.

“It doesn’t make sense, Steve,” the professor muttered, almost to himself. “This planet shouldn’t be frozen like this so close to its sun...”

“Not long now,” Steve said quietly, “What a fool I’ve been Matt...”

“How’s that Steve? We did all we could...”

Steve stared at the looming planet ahead of them. “No... I mean... I never told Venus that I love her...”

“Steve... She knows it. Believe me, she knows it.”

