

## **Chapter 8**

### **How Low Can You Get?**

In Unity City, the World President was gravely addressing the Earth's national leaders. "Gentlemen and ladies, you have all now studied the reports of the World Navy, the World Aquanaut Security Patrol and, the World Space Patrol." The latter was spoken with more than a little scorn that was not missed by Commander Zero. "Here is a report from the World Intelligence Network which underscores why we must retaliate immediately."

A few minutes passed silently as the heads of the world's governments and their security organisations studied the documents that were passed to each of them.

Finally, Commander Shore spoke. "Mr President, are we certain of the authenticity of these facts?" There were a few mutterings around the table as if to express the same question.

"Commander Shore, I can assure you that WIN are certain of their facts." The World President gazed steadily around the assembled leaders, "There is no element of doubt. The undersea races now have the capability to mount a devastating missile attack on the nations of the world. Our sources indicate this attack could happen within a half hour of Titan giving the order to strike."

"Titan?" Shore asked, "Mister President, Titan wouldn't be able to mount an attack like this..."

“Perhaps Shore, you are not as informed as you should be. Make no mistake, Titan will destroy our entire civilisation if we do not,” the President paused for effect, “destroy Titanica first!”

The Australian Prime Minister held up her copy of the WIN report, “There are only two pages here, just an outline. May we see the complete information? What proof have we that these assertions are correct?”

“Proof?” the World President glared at the woman who had dared to raise the question. “I can assure you that there is ample proof, more than ample proof.”

“Mister President,” The Australian continued, “May we be allowed to see the full report?”

“Out of the question. That information remains classified in the interests of World Security. You have my word that the information presented to you here is totally accurate, totally factual.”

Commander Zero glanced over at Sam Shore. The two men exchanged a worried look.

“Ladies, gentlemen, I will answer all questions, but we must act swiftly; there is very little time.”

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Steve Zodiac and Professor Matic sat silently at Fireball XL5’s useless controls, each man lost in his own thoughts. The planet that fate had selected as their executioner, now filled the whole of the cabin’s windows. The white light reflected from its frozen surface was dazzling. Under other circumstances the sight would have been breath-taking.

Steve suddenly jerked his head. Had he heard something? Something that sounded oddly familiar? All at once more noises began to fill the cabin, electronic whines, clicks, beeps, the hissing of circulating air. Lights

flickered on and remained steady. At the same time, Steve felt himself being pressed gently down into his seat, as the gravity compensators came on-line.

“Matt,” Steve called out in disbelief, “Fireball... She’s powering up!”

“Fire the retros!” Matt urged.

“I’m way ahead of you!” Steve’s hands flew over the controls. “We’ve got power, but still no retros...”

Fireball XL5 was now firmly caught in the pull of the planet’s gravity well and was accelerating. There was a violent jolt as the retros spluttered and fired.

“Again Steve!”

Steve fired the retros again and yet again.

“Steve! We’re still going too fast!”

“There’s only one way to pull Fireball out of this dive. I’m firing the main motors. I want full power. Now!”

“But Steve... ”

“No time to explain! Hang on!”

Fireball’s motors flared into life, sending the ship hurtling down towards the frozen world.

Unknown to Steve and Matt, Fireball XL1 was closing rapidly.

“Mahoney!” Ninety pointed at the central monitor screen, “They’re firing the retros! They have power!”

“Sir — they’ve just fired their main motors. They must be crazy. They’re heading straight for the planet. It’s suicide!”

Ninety reached for the radio, “Fireball XL1 to XL5... Eject! For pity’s sake eject!”

Part of Steve Zodiac’s mind registered Ninety’s voice, but simply filed it away. No chance to eject now. No time for thought. Altimeter needles spun as the frozen surface of the planet raced upwards to meet XL5. Steve’s knuckles whitened as he gripped the controls, “Come on Fireball, nose up, nose up!” It took every ounce of Steve’s skill to pull Fireball XL5 out of its suicide dive. For a brief moment he glimpsed Fireball’s dark shadow racing towards them across the icy surface, then he finally felt the great ship begin to respond to his touch with only seconds to spare.

Fireball was now skimming only yards above the surface of what appeared to be a frozen sea. The icy world was stretched out before them, in stark relief. Directly ahead and approaching rapidly was a rugged mountainous landscape which seemed intent on ripping Fireball to shreds. Slowly, the patrol ship began to lift. Steve felt himself being forced back into his seat as inertia started to override XL5’s artificial gravity. The ship thundered towards the frozen mountain range as she continued to gain height.

Steve was flying on instinct alone as he avoided the deadly mountain peaks that began to rise all around them. Fireball was still very sluggish even though her nuclear reactors were operating at full output again. He cursed as Fireball’s starboard wing clipped one of the deadly fingers of rock that reached up into the dark sky, the impact sending a shudder throughout the ship.

Steve fought to regain control of XL5 as she corkscrewed downwards towards disaster, “We’re not gonna make it Matt! We’re not gonna make it!”

Now the mountain range lay behind them and they were out over the frozen sea again. Steve managed to steady Fireball’s descent and lift her nose at the last possible moment. He cut power just as the ship hit the icy surface. To his amazement they remained in one piece and XL5 shot out over the

frozen ocean like some giant metal sledge, sending up a huge plume of icy spray.

“Fire the retros, Steve!” Matt exclaimed as he stared out of the cabin canopy in amazement.

“Hold tight Matt. We lost our starboard retros over the mountains.”

The retro under the port wing fired, sending the ship into a tight spiral. Slowly XL5 ground to a halt... And began to sink!

“Steve, the surface. It’s not water ice, it’s too soft. It must be frozen gas.”

“Whatever it is Matt we’re going down,” Steve said as he quickly turned to the neutroni transmitter. “Fireball XL5 to XL1. Do not land. I repeat. Do not land. The surface is unstable. We’re sinking fast!”

Steve’s last words had presented Lieutenant Ninety with a dilemma. He had to save the crew of XL5... But how? XL5’s nutomic reactors wouldn’t stand the pressure build up in that icy sludge. He guessed they had perhaps twenty minutes to get the ship or the crew out of there — before there was a nuclear explosion. Ninety sent Fireball XL1 hurtling down towards the planet, “We’ll use the magnetic clamps and pull XL5 back to the surface.”

“But there’s no time,” Mahoney protested. “Their nutomic motors could blow up at any minute! We’ll be caught in the blast!”

“We’re taking that risk,” stated Ninety with more confidence than he felt. Fireball XL1 swooped down low over the icy landscape, heading for the spot on the planet’s frozen ocean surface where XL5 was rapidly sinking. Minutes later Ninety fired the retros and put XL1 into free float less than twenty feet above XL5 with a deftness of touch that belied his limited experience. It was less than twelve months since Ninety had gained his astronaut’s wings and now he was in a situation that would have tested Steve Zodiac himself. He would feel a lot more confident if their roles were reversed right now...

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“Release the clamps, Mahoney. Now before it’s too late,” Ninety ordered as he watched XL5 slip further beneath the frozen sea.

“The controls are jammed, Lieutenant,” said Mahoney, sounding far too calm for Ninety’s liking.

“What the hell are you playing at man?!” Ninety yelled, as he leapt from the pilot’s seat. “That’s the wrong switch!” He leaned across Mahoney to press the correct sequence of switches.

With only seconds to spare four magnetic clamps shot away from beneath XL1, hawsers trailing behind them, and attached themselves to the upper body of Fireball XL5 that still remained above the frozen sea. The two space ships were now linked.

“Okay Mahoney, take us up — if you can remember how.”

Fireball XL1 began to lift, the hawsers that connected the two ships snapped taut but the magnetic clamps held as XL5 was slowly pulled out of the frozen sea.

“Look, I made a mistake Lieutenant. I’m a security officer not a patrol astronaut.”

“You make one more *mistake* on this mission, Sergeant and I will personally see you stripped of your rank and thrown out of Space City. Do I make myself clear?

“Yes Lieutenant Ninety, Sir. You’re a brilliant officer to be sure.”

Once a safe parking orbit had been established, a relieved Ninety turned to the neutroni transmitter and opened XL5’s frequency.

“Fireball XL1 to XL5. Come in Colonel Zodiac. Over... Fireball XL1 to XL5. Come in XL5...” There was no answer.

“You’re wasting your time, that you are Lieutenant.”

“What?” Ninety asked in exasperation.

“I’m afraid the radio doesn’t work. Unless I want it to... You see sir, I fixed it. That I did.”

Ninety turned angrily to his co-pilot, and came face to face with a ray gun pointed directly at his head. “Mahoney?!”

“And I can fix you too and all. Now don’t you be making any sudden moves sir - or I’ll blow your head clean off those fancy shoulders of yours.”

When Ninety made a desperate grab for his own gun, Mahoney fired. “Bad move, Lieutenant.”

Somewhere in the ship a lazoon howled mournfully.

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The World President was continuing to face opposition from the world’s national leaders as he presented his plans for the destruction of *Titanica*.

“Mr President,” the President of the U.S.A. asked, “could we not perform a covert operation to remove *Titan*? If we stage an all-out attack... The collateral damage...”

The World President shook his head, “Sadly it’s not an option. There is no time. *Titan* can launch an attack within thirty minutes; thirty short minutes. We cannot even engage the enemy in a conventional attack. Our submarines are not capable of getting down to the bottom of those undersea trenches, the pressure is just too great. Our only option is to mount a pre-emptive strike with hydromic warheads.”

“Mr President,” the Russian Premier objected, “Surely there is a peaceful solution to be found... International law...”

“*Titan* is a tyrant,” the World President responded, “A despot, as are most of these undersea rulers.”

“I think I know the type...” Commander Zero thought to himself as he watched the events unfold.

The President continued, “My information indicates that Titan is forming a massive alliance against us, and that alliance includes so-called friendly cities such as Pacifica. We will strike the first blow; a decisive blow. This is war ladies and gentlemen. A war against tyranny and oppression. We will be liberating the downtrodden undersea peoples. Our intent is simply to remove their ability to wage war. We will progressively, and systematically, neutralize all actual, and potential threats to our long established democracy... All of them! I will hear no more objections!” The World President slammed his fist down on the table. “There is no time. No time for covert operations nor for protracted peace talks. In fact, there is no time for any talk.” The World President stood up, “I am Commander-in-Chief of the world’s armed forces. My information is accurate beyond any reasonable doubt. My sources are impeccable. Therefore my duty, our duty, is clear. Commander Shore, you will return to Marineville at once. You will prepare to bombard the city of Titanica and the surrounding area with hydromic missiles. This meeting is at an end.”

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Steve and Matt sat at the controls of Fireball XL5, gazing at the stars they thought they’d never see again. “I’ll see Ninety gets a medal for this rescue,” Steve said gratefully.

“Yeah,” Matt agreed, “That boy’s sure got what it takes.”

“I guess I’ll call him up and we can have a pow-wow about what to do next.” Steve flicked on the radio. “Steve Zodiac to Fireball XL1. Great work Lieutenant.”

“Top of the mornin’ to you Colonel. This is Sergeant Mahoney at your service.”



“You guys did a great job! I’m coming over to discuss our next move. Where’s Ninety?”

“Ah, he’s seeing to the lazoon.”

“Zoonie? You brought Zoonie with you?”

“Yes Colonel that we did. It was the Lieutenant’s idea...”

A thought struck Steve, “Sergeant, have you contacted Space City?”

“Ah, not recently sir. We’ve been rather busy.”

“Good. Under no circumstances use the radio for anything other than ship to ship communications. We don’t want the enemy to know what we’re up to.”

“Understood Colonel.”

“Stand by XL1, I’ll be right over.”

Steve turned off the radio. “So, why’d you suppose the power came back on Matt?”

“Well, I can’t even say for sure why the power went off in the first place. I’ll have to run some tests.”

“No time for that now Matt. I’ll go talk with Ninety, maybe he has some fresh information. While I’m gone I want you to check the ship out. Take a look at the starboard retros. I’ve a hunch we’re gonna be seeing some action real soon.”

“Sure thing Steve. I’ll check Robert out too.”

“Robert! Say, I almost forgot about him. Will he be okay?”

“He’ll be fine. He’ll have taken a little nap when his fuel cells stopped functioning. I just have to wake him up. He can give me a hand with the repairs.”

“Fine Matt. Call me if there are any problems.”

Soon Steve had taken his oxygen pill and donned a thruster pack. Air hissed as the ejection tube sent him gently out of the airlock and into open space. He kicked with his legs and the thruster pack obediently responded by accelerating him away from XL5. Fireball XL1 hung in space only about a hundred yards above him. Steve never ceased to get a thrill from being out in space like this. His legs continued their swimming motion, deftly controlling the thruster pack. XL1 grew larger as he headed for the airlock.

Steve paused for a moment, allowing himself to come to a complete stop. He had a feeling of foreboding. Something was wrong. He felt it more strongly now that he was close to the rescue ship.

He shrugged, “Guess I won’t find out what’s wrong until I get over there...” As he kicked off again he checked that his ray gun was firmly on his belt.

Less than a minute later, Steve Zodiac entered the airlock of Fireball XL1. The outer door silently closed behind him. He waited while air hissed into the small chamber. He wondered why he felt so apprehensive. His hand returned to the gun at his waist. The inner door hissed open.

“Very good to see you Colonel Zodiac!” Sergeant Mahoney said warmly. He reached out to shake Steve by the hand.

Steve took Mahoney’s hand and shook it, “Nice work Mahoney, you guys did a swell job.”

Mahoney smiled, “Thanks Colonel. Lieutenant Ninety is waiting for you in the ship’s lounge.”

As they walked down the brightly lit corridor Steve began to relax, “Thanks Sergeant. Boy, I could sure use a coffee.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for the coffee Colonel.” Mahoney replied in an odd tone. “Put up your hands.”

Steve froze as he felt a ray gun pressed into his back. He had no choice, he raised his hands, "What goes on here Sergeant?"

"You'll be finding that out soon enough," Mahoney told him as he quickly removed Steve's ray gun from its belt sling. He roughly pushed Steve forward with a jab from his gun.

"Where's Lieutenant Ninety?" Steve demanded, "If you've harmed him..."

Mahoney laughed, "Ask me no questions and I'll be telling you no lies, Colonel." He shoved Steve into XL1's jail cell and locked the door. "Now don't you be worrying yourself Colonel, I'll take care of the Professor soon enough. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have important matters to attend to."

"Mahoney!" Steve yelled as the Sergeant strolled back down the corridor.

Mahoney stopped and turned, putting a finger to his lips, "Hush now Colonel or you'll be waking up the poor Lieutenant."

"Ninety?!" Steve whirled around and hurried over to an untidy pile of blankets on the floor; he found Lieutenant Ninety lying unconscious beneath them. Steve knelt beside him and carefully raised one of the young man's eyelids. "Stunned," he muttered to himself. "Coma ray effect."

He gently lifted Ninety on to one of the bunks. Without any medication, Steve could do no more than try to make Ninety more comfortable. "If only Venus were here..."

The wall speaker came on. "Fireball XL1 to Fireball XL5...This is Sergeant Mahoney... Respond please."

"Matic here Sergeant," Matt replied after a short delay.

"Just to let you know that Colonel Zodiac is safely aboard Professor. How are things going over there?"

"I'm just going to make repairs to the retros, might be a few hours I guess."

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“Okay Professor, I’ll let the Colonel know.”

Steve lay down on one of the cell bunks and stared up at the ceiling. “Another fine mess you’ve got yourself into Zodiac.”

He went over everything that had happened since Venus had seen her “big fish”. What if he’d taken more notice then? That submarine should not have been able to penetrate Space City’s security; but now he knew that must have been Mahoney’s work. Was Venus still a captive of Titan? Why had the alien space ship dived into the Pacific... so near to Titanica? Could they have taken her? Steve toyed with the idea of calling Mahoney on the intercom but decided against it. He’d likely just disconnect it. Steve thought of how many times he’d faced death on this mission and how in spite of all they’d done he was now held prisoner by a low down traitor.

Occasionally there were short bursts of static from the intercom. Steve was well aware that Mahoney must be transmitting coded messages, but he was unable to make any sense of them. Who was Mahoney working for? Titan? Aliens? Both? He found his mind kept returning to Venus. Where was she? Was she still alive?

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Hours passed as Steve lay on the cell bunk. Ninety hadn’t moved. He’d be out for a long time. A scuffling noise outside made Steve look up; had Mahoney returned? He went back to the door and looked out through the small window. The corridor outside seemed to be empty.

“Welcome ho-o-o-me!” crooned a familiar voice.

Looking down, Steve saw Zoonie peering up at him with his big sleepy eyes.

“Zoonie! Nice to see a friendly face around here,” Steve said warmly, as he reached through the bars to pat Zoonie’s head. “Say, do you think you can open this door?”

Zoonie stared back blankly, trying to understand why Steve didn't open the door.

"Open...the...door." Steve said patiently, but there was no reaction from the lazoon. Steve thought quickly. How could he make Zoonie understand? "Think Zodiac... Think!" he told himself, feeling that at any moment Mahoney would return. "That's it! Lazoons are telepaths... Must concentrate..."

Steve held the lazoon in his gaze and tried with all his will to mentally picture Zoonie opening the door lock. Zoonie raised his hands and began pushing at the door experimentally, then at the wall beside the door. Steve kept the single thought in his mind, "Unlock the door."

Zoonie found a small panel and slid it open and pressed a switch inside. A click, and the door slid open and Steve rushed out of the jail. Zoonie blinked sleepily up at Steve wondering if he'd done the right thing and Steve picked up the lazoon in his arms and hugged him gratefully. "Zoonie you are boss!"

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X2-Zero stood in a front room of his isolated house on the Isle of Lemoy. He looked up expectantly as the video-link with Titanica was established and Titan appeared on the screen before him.

"X2-Zero," the undersea ruler began in measured tones, "I have received a report from my scientists. They have analysed the tablets that you acquired from Marineville."

X2-Zero made no comment but bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"The report reveals a great deal," Titan continued. "In fact, the analysis confirms what I have always suspected".

He pointed an accusing finger at his minion, "X2-Zero...You are an utterly worthless and incompetent imbecile!!!"

X2-Zero began to tremble with fear, "But... but..."

Titan raised a hand, "Silence!" He glared at his grovelling surface agent. "You have brought me worthless food concentrates," he hissed.

"Mighty Titan... I... I do not understand... I thought..."

"Fool! You did not think. You never think." Titan leant forward, his angry visage now filling the screen, "I shall give you one last chance. One last chance to redeem your worthless carcass - before I order that it be fed to the sharks!"

"Forgive me, Your Majesty. I will do anything, O Mighty One."

Titan leaned back in his throne. For a moment he said nothing but his eyes continued to bore into his cowering servant. Finally, Titan spoke, "Listen carefully X2-Zero. I have a simple task for you. A task that even you should be capable of performing..."

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Steve searched cabinets and lockers in Fireball XL1's medical lab, looking for a coma ray antidote. Zoonie watched him expectantly.

As he searched, Zoonie began tugging at his sleeve.

"What's all this about?" Steve asked impatiently, "I'm busy."

Zoonie took Steve's hand, "Follow me-eee."

The lazoon led Steve over to a wall locker; Steve opened it. "Pet food!" Steve exclaimed. "Okay... So this is why you rescued me uh? To fix you a meal." Steve found a bowl and soon Zoonie was contentedly munching away.

As Steve resumed his search the lab intercom came on with a soft click. "Fireball XL1 to XL5. Are you there Professor?"

Steve stopped and listened. It was a short while before Matt responded. "XL5 to XL1, receiving you."

“Beggin’ your pardon Professor, but the Colonel’s asking for a status report.”

“Tell Steve we’ll have the retros patched up in about an hour.”

“That’s great Professor,” Mahoney replied. “Colonel Zodiac wants you to get over here when you’re done.”

“Sure thing Sergeant. Have some coffee waiting for me.”

“You’ll get a warm welcome; that’s for sure.”

Steve took a vial and a hypodermic from a locker and left Zoonie in the lab to finish his food. He hurried back towards the space jail. “Not much time. I’ve gotta deal with Mahoney before Matt gets here...”

As soon as he got back to the cell Steve prepared the hypodermic and gave Ninety a shot in the arm. It would be at least thirty minutes before Ninety came out of the coma. A lot could happen in half an hour. Fortunately Mahoney didn’t put in another appearance and Steve used the time to formulate a plan; a plan which needed a fully conscious Lieutenant Ninety.

Steve sat on the edge of Ninety’s bunk in XL1’s jail cell. He’d waited over half an hour and there was still no sign of Ninety coming out of the coma. “Ninety wake up!” he said urgently, grabbing Ninety’s shoulders and shaking him roughly. “This is an emergency... Snap out of it man!”

“Wha? What... Steve!” Ninety gasped as his eyes began to focus. “Mahoney... He’s mad...”

“Yeah... I know,” Steve agreed as he helped Ninety to sit up. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve been hit at point blank range with a coma ray...” Ninety groaned as he rubbed his aching limbs.

“You’ll be okay Lieutenant. Listen, Mahoney has control of the ship. We can’t risk a pitched battle in the control cabin, no telling what he would do. I’ve got a plan; but I’m gonna need your help...”

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“Mahoney do you hear me?” Steve’s voice called over the flight deck intercom.

Mahoney flicked a switch, “That I can Colonel. I’m afraid room service is not available for this trip.”

“Listen Mahoney... There’s something wrong with Ninety... You’d better get down here.”

“Oh, he’s just sleeping. He’ll be in a coma for hours. Now, if you don’t want to be in the same condition...”

“Mahoney, he’s not sleeping; he’s having some kind of reaction. He’s writhing about. I think he may die. Is that what you want?”

“To be quite truthful Colonel, I couldn’t care less. But my friends are on their way and they want to interrogate the both of you. I’ll be right along. But I warn you Zodiac, no tricks.”

When Mahoney arrived at the space jail he looked through the bars of the cell door. He could see Steve kneeling beside the blanket covered form of his friend.

“Mahoney!” Steve called. “He needs medical attention... Look at him; he’s in agony!”

“Yes judging by all that writhing, and the noises he’s making he sounds in a bad way, doesn’t he now? You think I’m stupid don’t you Zodiac? Well I’m



not opening this cell door. I'll give the lieutenant another dose of coma ray to put him back to sleep."

Mahoney aimed his ray gun through the cell bars.

"You'll kill him!" Steve exclaimed in horror.

"Maybe... Now wouldn't that be a sad thing. Stand aside, Zodiac."

A coma ray sped to its target and Mahoney crumpled to the floor unconscious. Ninety stooped to pick up the fallen ray gun.

"Nice work Lieutenant," Steve called. "Now get this door open again and let us out of here!"

Zoonie peered out from under the blankets, "Howdy folks," he crooned, happy to see Ninety again.

"Nice bit of writhing and moaning Zoonie," smiled Ninety as he opened the cell door. "How'd you get him to do that Colonel?"

"Easy, I just tickled him."

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"Say, there you are Steve!" Matt called as he hurried down the corridor to the space jail a few minutes later. "I wondered where you'd all disappeared to."

"Hello Matt. Ninety and I had a little spot of trouble with Sergeant Mahoney..."

"Trouble?"

Steve gestured into the open cell where Mahoney was lying unconscious on a bed. Lieutenant Ninety was taking his pulse.

"He'll be out for hours Steve." Ninety smiled when he saw Matt. "Hi Professor. Welcome aboard."

As the Lieutenant emerged from the cell and locked the door Matt looked back at Steve. "But what happened?"

"Plenty Matt. Mahoney was trying to take us all prisoner... Said he had 'friends' coming. C'mon, we'd better check out the controls in Junior."

Fireball XL1's controls seemed to be functioning normally, with the exception of the neutroni radio.

"Just some loose connections Steve, all fixed now," said Matt after checking the console.

"Good. Set it to UHF Matt."

"Old style radio Colonel?" Ninety asked in surprise.

"Yeah, if we have to talk ship to ship it'll be a long time before our messages are picked up. I want to take Mahoney's 'friends' by surprise."

"Who do you reckon they are Steve?"

"I don't know Matt, but I'm going to get Mahoney to tell me all he knows. Get back to the navigation bay and keep your eyes peeled for approaching ships. Lieutenant, you take over here. I'm going to deal with Sergeant Mahoney."

Steve headed back towards the space jail.

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In Marineville's Control Tower, Commander Shore had just briefed his daughter on events at Unity City.

"War?" Atlanta was shocked. "But father... Can the World President do that? Just declare a war?"

Shore shrugged. He looked weary but determined. "That's what he just did, honey. So I guess he can. The World President has the power and the glory."

Fisher's voice interrupted the discussion, "Commander Shore. All hydromic missiles are fuelled, armed and ready to go sir."

Shore turned his attention to the radio, "Okay Lieutenant. You'd better remain below - I'm sounding Battle Stations."

"P.W.O.R.," Fisher acknowledged ending his transmission.

"OK Atlanta, this is it. Sound General Alert."

Atlanta pressed a control on her console and the rhythmic drum-beat of the alert sounded throughout Marineville. Commander Shore picked up a microphone, "Attention! This is Marineville Control. All personnel stand by for Battle Stations. All civilian personnel to remain in their quarters. All vehicles proceed to nearest ramp area. Ten seconds... Five seconds... Four...Three... Two... One... Zero."

"Tower to Power Plant," Atlanta said crisply. "Commence battle stations procedure."

Every building in Marineville began to slowly sink downward on huge hydraulic supports. Within minutes all were below ground level and massive reinforced concrete doors slammed shut above them. Emergency lighting illuminated the vast underground bunker.

At once Commander Shore contacted the missile control room. "Okay Fisher - target zone is south-south west five thousand. Area reference nineteen."

"Titanica sir?" Fisher asked a little nervously.

"Titanica," confirmed Shore. "Commence ten minute countdown."

"P.W.O.R."

Shore snapped off the radio. "I guess Titan's had this coming to him for some time..."

“Yes father,” Atlanta said quietly, “Perhaps this will avenge poor Troy...” A thought suddenly struck her. “But what about Marina? She may have gone to Titanica to look for Doctor Venus...”

“Easy Atlanta. We don’t know where Marina is. The security boys think she may be with her father in Pacifica.” Shore didn’t add that if Marina was Titan’s prisoner then death would likely be a blessed release.

Atlanta nodded, “This is like some terrible nightmare... But...”

“...But we have a job to do,” her father finished.

Commander Shore and Atlanta watched a monitor screen showing the missile launch area. A dozen hydromic missiles were sliding upwards from their underground silos into launch positions beside their gantries.

“It won’t be long now Atlanta,” Shore said quietly.

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In his old house on the Isle of Lemoy, Surface Agent X2-Zero was feverishly checking dials and display screens - one of which was showing Marineville’s missile launch site. He paused to wipe his brow. “At last. All is prepared without a marine minute to spare.”

Suppressing an evil chuckle X2-Zero turned a control knob and Fisher’s voice crackled from a speaker, “Five minutes to missile launch. All checks read green. All systems are go for launch.”

The evil chuckle was suppressed no longer, “Heh heh heh...” The agent extended a green skinned hand and activated a control. At once Titan’s image replaced the Marineville scene.

“Report!” Titan demanded.

“All goes according to plan Your Majesty.” X2-Zero hoped fervently that things would stay that way.

“Good. That is well for you X2-Zero,” Titan conceded imperiously.

“This was a most complex task Majesty but your loyal...”

“Silence miserable fool!” commanded Titan waving a dismissive hand, “I will contact our friends in Pacifica. I have interesting news for them.”

Titan broke the connection with X2-Zero and smiled as he opened a direct channel to Pacifica.

Less than a marine minute later, Aphony’s face appeared on Titan’s screen.

“Greetings Aphony,” Titan intoned gravely. “I offer assistance to you and your people...”

Aphony of course said nothing, but Titan knew he had his full attention.

“Even as I speak the Terraineans are launching a missile attack to obliterate your beautiful city.”

Aphony shook his head in disbelief.

“I’m afraid it’s quite true Aphony. Observe...”

The Pacifican leader watched as the smiling face of Titan was replaced by another scene. Hydromic missiles were thundering into the skies above Marineville.

“Twelve hydromic missiles Aphony,” Titan explained, “Alas, my surface agents have only now uncovered this Terrainean plot. Your city of Pacifica is doomed I am certain. However I have despatched a shoal of my Mechanical Fish to render aid to you and your unfortunate people.”

Titan’s image returned to Aphony’s screen, his face grim. “I suggest you order a complete evacuation of Pacifica. You have perhaps thirty marine minutes. I pledge I will avenge the destruction of your peaceful city.”