

Chapter 11

Off The Record

Steve climbed into his seat and checked over Fireball XL5's instrumentation. It felt good to be back in his own uniform and back at the controls of his own ship. He looked over at Robert in the co-pilot's seat. "How do you feel Robert? Is everything A-Okay?"

The robot responded immediately, "A-Okay"

"You're a man of few words Robert. Great to have you back at the controls. Maintain present course and speed."

"Maintain present course and speed," Robert confirmed.

Steve called Matt over the ship's intercom, "Boss work Professor, Robert seems good as new."

"He should be fine now Steve, I've given him a thorough check-up."

"I hope you don't mind Steve... I've brought the lazoona across from XL1 and put him in Venus's lab. I figured he'd feel more at home here."

Steve smiled, "Well Zoonie is part of the crew Matt, and he did bust me out of jail. I've got a hunch he's going to help us find Venus before too long."

"I sure hope so Steve."

"Are you going back to XL1 now Matt? Ninety is going to need a hand with that ship."

"All set Steve, but before I go, there's something important I need to discuss with you."

A short while later, Matt joined Steve in XL5's control cabin.

Steve could see that the Professor was worried, “Okay Matt, what’s on your mind?”

Matt leaned on the back of Robert’s chair as he spoke, “I figured something out about what the Aquaphibians are up to Steve.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve been doing some calculations while I was resting up in the space jail and I’ve just verified the results on XL5’s computers.”

“And?”

“I reckon I know what the Aquaphibians are planning. There was a rumour that the Zofeits were working on some kind of new technology. From what you got out of Mahoney I’d say they must have designed that nuclear retardant ray that knocked out our power systems.”

“You think that’s why the Zofeits were massacred Matt?”

“Sure looks like a possibility Steve. The Zofeits wouldn’t have had the resources to fully, er, utilize their invention; they were just curious I guess.”

“Yeah... like the cat. D’you think the Aquaphibians could really threaten the Earth. I mean, tamper with the Sun itself?”

“Yes Steve, reckon I do. But I did the math; it’d take hundreds of spaceships to generate the power to affect something as massive as a star.”

“So it’s unlikely they can use this ‘super weapon’ of theirs?”

“I’d like to say that Steve. But I reckon that ‘ice planet’ we crashed on was a victim of the super weapon.”

“You mean the Aquaphibians caused a huge freeze up?”

“More than a freeze Steve. I think they must have slowed the nuclear fusion in the star itself; and then allowed it to return to normal. Like putting ice in the sun to cool it down, just long enough.”

Steve felt his blood run cold. “So they can do it. They can wipe out our entire Solar System... No place in the galaxy would be safe from that kind of weapon.”

“We gotta find their spaceships Steve — before...”

“Yeah, let’s get to work finding that water world of theirs.”

Matt was soon sitting at the main console in Fireball XL1’s navigation bay analysing data collected by the astroscope with the aid of his star charts and the ship’s computer. He spoke excitedly into the intercom, “Steve, our current heading will take us towards a nearby unexplored star system with six planets. We could be there in two days.”

“Did you get that Lieutenant?” asked Steve over the ship to ship radio

“Sure did Colonel.”

“Prepare to move out, we’re going hunting!”

Captain Jacques Jordan frowned as he sat at his desk in his Marineville apartment. He’d just spoken with Atlanta Shore, who was now a resident of Marineville’s high security cell block — on his orders. Now he was trying to make some kind of sense of what was really going on. Was Atlanta lying? Was there any truth in her story of sabotage by World Intelligence agents? Fisher had found coralamic explosives planted in each of the new atomic submarines. Even one detonation would have been enough to tear Marineville apart. Would his own side really plot to destroy Marineville?

Unthinkable.

And yet... How was it that the World President had been ready to make a speech about the attack a mere thirty minutes after Jordan had reported Swordfish stolen? And why had the World President himself ordered the destruction of Swordfish?

The Captain made sure that his door was locked before activating his videophone. The head of the World Navy answered the call directly. "Hello Captain Jordan. Why did you request this scrambled video call?"

"Admiral Beatty, please forgive the secretive nature of my contact with you." Jordan looked nervously back towards his door.

"Jacques, you're as jumpy as a catfish. What is it man?"

"Admiral, I am greatly troubled by recent events here at Marineville."

"I've read the initial reports about the theft of Swordfish, Captain. In my view you handled the matter most effectively."

"There's more to the attack than my reports suggest sir." Jordan paused for a moment before continuing. "Admiral, I must speak with you privately — off the record, before submitting additional information which has come to light."

"Jacques, when I had you transferred to head WASP operations I had every confidence in you. Your concerns are my concerns; go ahead, talk freely."

"Admiral, I have strong evidence to the effect that World Intelligence Network agents were responsible for the theft of Swordfish and the planting of bombs here at Marineville."

Beatty glanced over his shoulder at his own door. Without a word, he walked over to it and checked that it was locked.

"Jacques," he said gravely as he returned to his desk, "your news is not entirely unexpected, but I for one doubted it would go as far as this."

“Admiral, I ‘ave a witness to sabotage at this installation by two World Intelligence agents, one posing as an undersea alien.”

“The motive?”

“In my opinion sir, the motive would have been to stir up hatred towards the undersea peoples, and promote the war effort against them.”

“Excellent work Captain.” Admiral Beatty looked very serious, “Tell me, who is aware of this evidence Jacques?”

“Only you and I sir. I interrogated the witness personally, then contacted you immediately.”

“That is as well. We need absolute proof before we can act. Who is your witness? Can he be trusted?”

“The witness is Lieutenant Shore. The Commander’s daughter sir.”

“Ah yes, she takes after her father. Sam Shore was a good man; highly respected. But since he’s been arrested for treason, I doubt his daughter’s testimony would hold water right now...”

Jordan looked uncomfortable, “I placed Lieutenant Shore in the cells as she was discovered at the controls of the stolen Swordfish. However, it now seems she tried to stop the WIN agents and was captured and left for dead. Only her quick thinking saved her from destruction by our strike force.”

“That’s going to be rather difficult for her to prove Jordan.”

Jordan nodded, “But I ‘ave a strong feeling that she is telling the truth Admiral.”

“Oh I’m sure she is Captain.” replied Beatty

“You are sir?”

“Listen Jacques, I want you to keep all of this under your hat, no one must know — yet. When the time comes to act, I’ll be in touch.”

“Gee, General, aren’t they a fantastic sight?!”

Space General Wilbur J. Zero studied the images on the astroscope thoughtfully. “What in space are those things supposed to be Lieutenant?”

“Those are our new space battleships sir. The might of the Solar System in full array!”

Zero adjusted the controls to zoom in on one of the ships. “Look at that heap of junk Ninety. It looks like a bunch of ping pong balls stuck on tubes.”

“You said the functional design would save money sir.”

“I did? I guess that’s okay then. Let’s see...” Zero said uncertainly, as he tried to make sense of the mass of flashing symbols on the space sector map, “Where’s the eleventh fleet right now?”

Lieutenant Ninety looked across from his desk, “Sir, they’re patrolling the space border looking for trouble.”

“I hope those trigger-happy idiots don’t start another war with those giant animated jelly beans. What about the sixth fleet?”

“We lost the sixth fleet sir...”

“Well don’t just sit there man — find it! Those fleets cost loads of bucks. We can’t go around losing them.”

Ninety shrugged. “No sir. Do you still want the fifteenth fleet to rendezvous with the fourth fleet sir?”

“Er, I guess so Ninety. Er, why did I....?”

“The Space Amazons sir; they were massing, and you planned a counter attack.”

Space General Zero was suddenly thrown off balance. “Ninety! The Tower, it’s stopped turning!”

The intercom speaker buzzed, “Space General Zero, this is serious!”

“What is it Jock? Why has the Tower stopped turning?”

“Och, I canna get t’ the controls, ye ken. We’re being overpowered by a bunch o’ big bonny lassies wi’ huge biceps. They’ve got us all pinned down...” replied Space City’s Chief Engineer.

Zero cast a worried glance in Ninety’s direction.

“Sir!” Ninety suddenly yelled in alarm. “It’s the Space Amazons! They’re in the elevator now!”

Within moments, the elevator doors snapped open and a tall, dark-haired female warrior emerged. Without a word, she began striding purposefully towards Space General Zero, an evil smile on her beautiful face.

“No... Keep back!” Zero shouted as strong hands gripped his shoulders. “Let go... You... You... Space Vixen! Eleanor?!”

“Wilbur honey... It’s all right dear. You just had another of your bad dreams.”

Zero rubbed his eyes as he sat up in bed.

“Was it the war with the giant animated jelly beans again?” His wife asked soothingly.

“Er yeah... And I thought you were a Space Amazon...”

“Wilbur, I think we should take a vacation dear. You need a good long rest...”

“But I can’t do that dear. I’ve got a space battle fleet to assemble...”

“We’ll talk about it in the morning Wilbur. Now you just go right on back to sleep. You’ve got an appointment to see your tailor bright and early tomorrow for that nice new uniform.”

But before Zero could get back to sleep the telephone rang.

Eleanor answered the call, “Oh no that’s fine Lieutenant, we weren’t asleep. Really? Oh, Okay, I’ll tell him. Thank you.”

“Who in blazes was that calling at two AM?”

“That was the watch officer. There’s an urgent video call for you.”

“At two AM?”

“Priority One — Scrambled. He didn’t say who was calling, honey.”

Two minutes later General Zero was in his office three floors below his apartment, sitting at his video phone.

The caller was the Supreme Head of the World Space Patrol, General George Rossiter.

“Wilbur, I need to discuss something with you in confidence — just between you and me. Whatever is said between us is strictly off the record — this video link is scrambled.”

Zero cleared his throat, “I understand, General Rossiter.”

“Good man.” Rossiter leaned forward, watching Zero’s expression intently.

“Tell me Wilbur, what is your current assessment of the World President? Just you and me talking, you understand.”

“Well sir, I... er that is...”

“Wilbur. I know I’m putting you in a very awkward position; you’ve trusted me in the past — trust me now. This is vital. Whatever you say will not affect the high opinion I hold of you.”

“Frankly sir, and strictly off the record, and just between you and me...”
Zero took a deep breath, “I’d say the President is off his trolley, er, sir.”

Rossiter sat back in his chair. “Thanks Wilbur. I can tell you that you and I are not alone in that assessment.”

Zero felt the sweat dripping down his spine. This was feeling uncomfortably like treason. “General, he wants me to draw up plans for a space battle fleet. He is ignoring the United Planets... the Treaty of Regulus...”

Rossiter nodded, “Undoing all that we fought for in the 2040’s. The man is a danger to Earth and peace between the planets.”

“But what can we do sir?”

“Wilbur, I’m working with a group of very influential people who are aiming to press for a vote of no confidence in the World President. I don’t want to disclose their identities right now, but they include many national leaders. I need to know the military will back us up — if necessary.”

“General, the World Space Patrol is yours to command.”

“Thanks Wilbur; this is going to be a tough cookie, but you and I have fought against worse odds.”

Lieutenant Atlanta Shore woke up abruptly. She sat on her cell bunk, staring around at the bare walls. She had no idea what the time was. They’d taken her wristwatch, and there were no windows in the high security prison block. She could hear muffled voices outside in the corridor. Someone was laughing.

Atlanta slammed her fists down on the bunk in frustration. This was so unfair. She’d done her duty. Why was she locked in a cell? Surely Captain Jordan must have believed her. He was just being cautious, she told herself.

He'd promised to call first thing, once he'd had time to consider all the facts. He'd see reason. Wouldn't he?

Atlanta stood up as she heard footsteps approaching her cell. It must be Jacques; he'd have her released now. She brushed creases from her uniform and ran her hands through her hair. She felt a mess.

A uniformed guard appeared at the cell door. "I hope you aren't going to give me any trouble Lieutenant."

"Has Captain Jordan arrived here yet?"

"Jordan? No, not yet. Turn around and put both hands through the bars. I have to put the cuffs back on. "

"They aren't necessary..."

"Yeah. Guess that's why they put you in the high security wing, right? Are you going to co-operate or do we have to get tough?"

Atlanta sighed and turned around, holding her wrists though the bars.

"There you go." said the guard as he snapped the handcuffs on. "You can sit down on the bunk."

Atlanta was surprised, "I'm not being taken anywhere?"

The guard considered, "Let's just say you're staying right here."

"Then why the handcuffs?"

"You've got a visitor. He wants to talk to you in private and we want to keep him safe from harm while he's in your cell."

"Who is it?"

"Guess he'll introduce himself, I'll go fetch him now."

Atlanta sat and waited.

A few minutes later the guard returned and unlocked the cell door. “Okay,” he called, “She’s all yours.”

A grey suited man smiled as he stepped inside, “Hello Lieutenant Shore.” He flashed an ID card, “Jackson, World Intelligence — but you can call me Al.”

Atlanta stood up in alarm, “Guard! Arrest this man — he’s one of the saboteurs!”

The guard grinned. “This one’s a real joker, Al.” he said, as he locked the cell door. “I’ll be back in an hour. I’ll see you’re not disturbed.”

“Call Captain Jordan!” Atlanta screamed, but the guard ignored her and disappeared down the corridor.

Al casually lit a cigarette.

“Why don’t you sit down little girl?” he said, gesturing to the bunk. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Keep away from me.” Atlanta said, nervously backing into a corner.”

Al grabbed Atlanta roughly by the chin, forcing her to look up at him. “Be a good girl and I can make this easier on you.”

Atlanta forced herself to speak, “What do you mean?”

“In a nutshell; how do you want to die?”