

Chapter 19

Imposter

Some two and a half hours out from Earth, the SS Ventura's flight plan was suddenly interrupted.

"Well, how do you like that!" the Ventura's captain asked nobody in particular, as he angrily shut off the radio.

"But, don't they need a warrant or something?" asked the Senior Flight Stewardess

"Janice, do you want to have a go arguing that with them?"

"No, Captain. You don't suppose one of the passengers might be carrying something illegal?"

"What? On the SS Ventura? Now wouldn't that be a real surprise!"

The navigator and co-pilot both glanced nervously towards one of the wall lockers.

"Look Janice, I don't like this one bit. Just keep the passengers calm and keep the cops off our flight deck. Safety; our safety."

"What shall I tell the passengers?"

"That's your job, I just get to fly this crate."

The dull thud of retro rockets vibrated through the ship.

The Ventura's passengers were not feeling very calm.

"We're slowing down!"

"But it's another two hours before we reach Mars! What's happening?"

"What goes on?"

"I've got to arrive at Marsport on time."

"Hiram, what's happening?"

Beatty glanced anxiously at the oxygen pill dispenser in front of him. It was still firmly closed.

A harassed looking stewardess stepped through the door into the passenger area. She hastily pulled a microphone from her belt. "Could I have your attention please?"

The passengers began talking more loudly, one of them screamed.

"Could I have your attention please? There is no cause for alarm. This is a routine stop."

"But we must still be ten million miles from Mars!" someone shouted.

The stewardess smiled, a little unconvincingly, "You are correct madam. We are still approximately 10.3 million miles from Mars. This is just a routine inspection by Mars Police. If you look out of the port windows... Those on your left... you will see a police cruiser. They will come alongside and make a routine inspection. Please remain seated. We'll be on our way in a very short time."

Beatty turned to the toy salesman sitting beside him, "Is this routine?"

The man shook his head, "Never known this happen before. Something must be up. Say, are you all right?"

Beatty wiped his brow with a handkerchief, "Yes, yes. Thank you I'm fine. Just getting a little hot in here don't you think?"

Soon the police cruiser was docking with the Ventura.

"This is your captain speaking... Please remain seated and do as the police officers ask. This won't take long and won't affect our schedule."

Three uniformed Mars policemen strode into the passenger cabin. For now, their guns remained in their holsters. The men had the light, slender look of

men born on Mars. Their demeanour was far from light. One of the men pointed to where Beatty was sitting. Without a word they walked over.

"You Mr. Smith?"

"Yes." Beatty and the toy salesman both said in unison.

Beatty glared at his companion.

The salesman smiled back innocently, "Well, what do you know? Something else we have in common!"

"Which one of you is John Smith?" a policeman demanded gruffly.

"I am"

"I'm John Smith."

The toy salesman reached into his jacket.

"Freeze!" Now the guns were drawn.

"I was just getting some ID", the toy salesman explained. "Would you mind telling us what this is all about?"

"We have been notified that there is a passenger aboard who is a dangerous criminal posing as a John Smith."

"What kind of criminal?" Beatty demanded to know.

"I must ask you to remain calm and not alarm the other passengers. I'm afraid we'll have to take you both back to headquarters and find out the truth of the matter."

The salesman looked hurt, "am I under arrest officer?"

"Keep this up and you will be. Just do as we say."

Beatty started to reach down to his under seat luggage compartment.

"Hold it Smith. Get up both of you. We'll take care of your hand luggage."

Beatty pointed an angry finger at the policeman, "I warn you, don't try to open that briefcase."

There was a stifled shriek from a passenger in the seats behind.

The policeman lowered his voice, "Please come quietly Mr. Smith. We'll discuss your hand luggage later."

The officer turned his attention to the toy salesman, "Do you have anything to say about your hand luggage, 'Mr. Smith'?"

"I would strongly advise that you don't open it, but I'll open it for you if you like."

The officer had had enough, "Okay, you two jokers, move it!"

The other passengers watched them go. There was a collective sigh of relief.

On the alien water world many light years away, Marina was following an Aquaphibian down into a deep undersea canyon. She was acutely aware of the ever increasing depth as her body adjusted to the changing pressure. It was getting dark, even to her eyes. She was becoming tired and her limbs were aching. The Aquaphibian had proved to be a very powerful swimmer and had seemed to maintain his speed without effort.

Now they were not far from the rocky and barren seabed. Marina began to edge closer to the alien, using the rock formations as cover. Ahead of them she could make out the entrance to a cavern set in the mountainous cliffs. Without hesitation, the Aquaphibian swam to the gaping entrance and disappeared inside.

Swimming warily up to the rocky opening, Marina cautiously peered into the darkness. She could see no sign of the Aquaphibian but her keen eyes detected an eerie glow coming from deep within the cave. Marina knew she had to find out what it was. She had never felt this alone and desperate before, even when she had been imprisoned as one of Titan's slaves. She

had to find a way to free her friends from the strange alien mind control. Perhaps the answer lay within the cave...

Aboard the police cruiser the two 'Smiths' were being questioned.

Beatty was fuming, "I demand to speak to the Mars Police Commissioner."

The policeman glared back at him, "Well, you are in luck there. He wants to speak to you, or at least to John Smith. Could be this other fellow of course."

"Most certainly," said the salesman, "I'd also like to talk with Mr. Hampson. I always cooperate with the police."

"Very public spirited I'm sure. Listen, my orders are to bring one Mr. John Smith to the Commissioner. ONE John Smith. We appear to have two candidates. Okay, that's made things difficult for us. I don't like that. If it's going to be difficult for us it's going to be way more difficult for you two."

"I understand." said the salesman, "How may I help you?"

"Look," Beatty said with exasperation, "Just call up Hampson, show him my ID. He knows who I am."

"All in good time," the policeman said. "It'll take about an hour to reach Phobos. Your identification papers are being checked. So, tell me, am I supposed to believe that there being two John Smiths on the flight is a coincidence? What's your explanation?"

"Well," the salesman began, "John Smith is a pretty common name. You'd be surprised what the probability..."

"I don't give a damn about probability mister 'Smith'. Why were you on that flight?"

"I have to attend a very important meeting at the Mars chocolate factory."

"Why? You claim to be a toy salesman. "What's that got to do with a chocolate factory?"

"It's a big promotion. Sales promotion that is."

"Go on, I'm listening."

"You've heard of Martian Delights?"

"Who hasn't? Can't stand them myself."

"Well, the company I work for, Century 21 Toys, is angling for a contract with Martian Chocolates. We already did toy spaceships for their Martian Crunchies. Mail-away offers. You know, collect the box tops..."

"Okay, okay. I get it. And you," the officer pointed a finger at Beatty. "Why were you on that flight?"

"I'm attending a meeting with Police Commissioner Hampson."

"Indeed? You may soon well be. Let's see now, there was only one Mr. Smith on the passenger list..."

"I can explain that," the toy salesman volunteered, "I was early for my flight. There must have been a last minute seat cancellation because I was able to sort of pay extra to get on the earlier flight."

"Aren't expense accounts wonderful things. And you just happened to find yourself sitting by another Mr. John Smith?"

"That's the seat ticket they sold me, so that's where I sat. Coincidences are not illegal, officer."

"Let that go, for now. Would you both like to explain what you each have in these cases?"

"Private papers," Beatty said flatly, "Ask your Commissioner."

"Don't worry, I will. And you?"

"Toy samples."

"OK that's enough for now." the policeman gestured to his two men, "You'll be taken to the holding cells while we check out your stories."

"You can't do that!" Beatty shouted.

"You can take that up with the Commissioner later, if your story checks out. Meanwhile you'll both do what you are told."

After the men had left, the policeman reluctantly switched on his video phone.

Alone in his cell, the toy salesman was listening to his wristwatch intently, but he wasn't listening to the minutes tick by.

"What do you mean Mason? You have two Smiths?"

"Two of the passengers claimed to be John Smith sir. We checked their ident cards, they seem to be genuine. Thought we'd better bring both to be sure."

"Show me their IDs."

"Yes sir," Mason pressed a button on his video phone.

"Okay, the one on the left is our man. You'd better give him my apologies for the inconvenience."

"And the other guy? We let him go?"

"On the contrary. He's obviously not who he claims. You say his ID checked out?"

"Yes sir, it seems to be authentic.

"Then he's not just some snooping journalist. Still, we can deal with him. All the same, I'm curious. See if you can get the truth out of him before he's disposed of."

On the fourth planet of a distant star, Marina paused at the entrance to a deep undersea cavern. She listened, straining her ears to pick up the faintest sound from within. All was silent. She had to find out why the Aquaphibian had come here.

The faint light in the deep recesses of the cave seemed to beckon her. Furtively, she moved inside, keeping close to the uneven walls of the cave, swimming low and making use of the cover provided by the fallen rocks strewn across the floor. As she swam closer she could see a figure silhouetted by the light; presumably the Aquaphibian she had followed here. It was kneeling motionless before the source of the eerie glow.

Very cautiously, Marina began to edge closer. Suddenly she felt overwhelmed by what seemed like sounds echoing inside her head. Instinctively, but uselessly, the girl clasped her hands tightly over her ears. She recognized the sensation, she'd felt it before, in *Titanica*; but this was far worse.

Stumbling from her rocky hiding place, Marina swam frantically back to the mouth of the cave. Once outside, the sounds inside her head began to diminish to tolerable levels. She tried to make sense of what she was 'hearing'.

It was telepathy certainly. Very powerful telepathy. She focused her thoughts and immediately images began to form in her mind's eye; one image quickly fading into another and another; too fast for her to recognise what they were. She was seeing events over and over though she could not quite make them out.

Marina had seen Teufel, Titan's fish-god, do this. She'd felt the thoughts that Teufel had pulled from Troy Tempest's mind when he had been captured and put on trial in Titan's palace. But the sheer intensity of this interrogation was like nothing she'd experienced before. A powerful intelligence was sifting through the mind of the Aquaphibian she'd followed. It was learning of recent events that the Aquaphibian had experienced.

Abruptly the sounds and images ceased. The ensuing mental silence was overpowering.

Then Marina felt the thoughts forming again, this time seeing her own face and feeling intense malevolence. Shocked, she realized that the thing in the cave had somehow sensed her or perhaps learned of her from the Aquaphibian.

Hurriedly leaving the cave, Marina began swimming swiftly back the way she had come, making her aching body move as fast as it could. She could sense that she would soon be pursued — and if captured she would be killed.

She had to get away before the evil entity in the cave could focus its mind upon her, or she would surely die on this far-flung world.

Mason looked up from his desk as one of his men brought the toy salesman back into the interview room. "Sit down 'Smith'," he snapped irritably, "I want the truth. You are an imposter, aren't you?"

The other policeman pushed the salesman roughly down into a chair. At a gesture from Mason he went back to the door and stood watching, his hand resting meaningfully on his holstered ray gun.

Smith innocently raised his eyebrows, "Imposter? You mean you don't believe I'm who I say I am?"

"Enough with the play acting! Listen Buster, I can make things very unpleasant for you. Very unpleasant indeed."

"Oh, I see. You are the bad cop. But where's the good cop?"

"There isn't one. Budget cuts!"

"If there really is an imposter," the salesman said calmly, "Don't you think it might be that other fellow calling himself John Smith?"

"Shut up! I'm asking the questions". The officer pointed to the chrome coloured briefcase on the desk, "What's in the case?"

"Toy samples, like I said."

"Show me. Unlock the case and open it... Slowly."

The salesman leaned forward and with a few careful clicks of catches the case was dutifully unlocked.

"There you go." As the lid was slowly lifted up, there was a brief, low pitched buzz, as if some insect might have flown out, but Mason was staring at the contents of the case.

"What's this? A gun?"

"Hardly, I'd never have got a gun through space-port security. It's just a plastic replica antique, along with shoulder holster and authentically styled accessories."

"Antique?" Mason picked up the gun and looked at it suspiciously.

"It's quite safe. A harmless model of a Walther PPK, double action 7.6mm. Like it says on the simulated wooden plinth."

"Why antique?"

"Oh, we'd love to make replicas of guns like those you guys are carrying. But we can only sell really accurate looking replicas of guns that are over a hundred years old. As you must surely be aware, working in law enforcement, as you do."

The toy gun was peered at closely and then discarded. "And this?" The officer picked up a small printed card, "And all because the girl knows the secret of a box of Martian Delights"

"Uh, it's still in the beta stage I'm afraid. A proposed holo-vid commercial. Some gun toting guy dressed in black travelling around the solar system and doing dangerous and exciting stunts, in order to deliver a box of chocolates to his girl."

"Why?"

The imposter shrugged, "Beats me. I'm just a salesman."

The officer exchanged an exasperated look with the guard standing at the door.

A few more objects were picked up at random and tossed back down, into the case. "Cheap trash."

"Some of our previous highly popular premium promotions."

"So this is all just cheap toy gadgets for some kind of old fashioned spy commercial?" questioned Mason

"Yes, but my company," the salesman said, as he casually picked out a plastic badge, "prefers the term 'Special Agent'."

"I don't care what they..."

The desk intercom buzzed and Mason stabbed at a button impatiently, "What is it Nolan?"

"Sir, we've sighted the Lady Anne. Rendezvous in five minutes."

"I'll be right up." The officer gestured to the guard, "Keep an eye on this idiot. He'll be coming with us."

The salesman looked surprised, "We're not going to Phobos then?"

"No Mr. Smith, you're not going to Phobos."

Fireballs XL5 and XL1 were drawing near to the uncharted star system. In XL5's navigation bay Professor Matic was relaying information about the six planets.

"Five of the planets have no atmosphere and are heavily cratered, but the fourth planet appears to be a water world with a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere."

“That sounds like an ideal world for those Aquaphibians,” Steve Zodiac replied from the controls of XL5, “Great work Matt. Ninety, did you get all that?”

Over in Fireball XL1 Ninety acknowledged, “Yes Colonel, loud and clear.”

“Right,” Steve told the others, “planet four is our baby — but we’ll head for the fifth planet first and take a peek from there.”

Ten minutes later the two World Space Patrol ships entered the star system and were soon orbiting the fifth planet — a cold barren rock of a world.

Matt was already scanning the water world. He switched on the intercom. “I’m building up a good picture of planet four, Steve. It is mostly ocean with a sprinkling of small islands. No sign of life, but the atmosphere, temperature and gravity are pretty much like Earth’s.”

In the control cabin, Steve activated his central viewer, “Okay Matt, let me see what you’ve got so far.”

“Hold it Steve... I’m getting some anomalous data in the infra-red spectrum. Some kind of artificial structures, bottom of the ocean.”

“Structures?”

“Yeah, might be their base, I guess. Four, one, nine zero-blue.”

Steve examined the fuzzy images Matt was relaying. “Can you get any more detail Matt?”

“Not with passive scanning Steve. We’d risk our probing being spotted.”

“Matt, I’m taking Fireball Junior over to get a closer look.”

“How close, Steve?”

“I’m gonna try and get into that base of theirs.”

“But, Steve...”

“I’m taking Robert. I want you and Ninety to wait here.”

“There’s a good chance those Aquaphibians will track your approach,” warned Matt.

“I’ll be going down fast. Junior should survive an unpowered dive into that ocean. Hopefully they’ll think I’m just a meteor.”

Matt chuckled “What’s good for the space-goose, eh, Steve.”

A few minutes later, Steve released the electro-magnetic locks and fired Fireball Junior’s motors, sending the small ship speeding towards the fourth planet. He had no real plan of action for when he reached the aliens’ base. He’d have to trust to his wits. He had to find Venus — if he wasn’t already too late...

The short trip was uneventful and in less than half an hour the little ship was ploughing through the atmosphere of the water world.

Steve knew that this part of his plan was very risky; he only had to look at the hull temperature gauge if he needed a reminder of that fact, but he dare not fire the retros until the last possible second if he wanted to avoid detection.

“Firing retros.” Robert warned, reaching out a claw to operate the controls, “Firing retros.”

“No Robert!” Steve ordered, “Leave this to me!”

Fireball Junior’s hull was glowing a deep red as she broke through the cloud cover and Steve saw the blue ocean rushing up to meet them. If the retros fail now...

Steve fired the retro rockets with only seconds to spare and with no more than a jolt Junior cleaved through the waves and was diving beneath the alien ocean.

Steve heaved a sigh of relief. “Gravity compensators — I love you.”
