

Chapter 22

Intercept

Jacob Richards stood on the outer hull of the Lady Ann as he nervously watched his men working on the damaged fuel line. He had a blaster in his pocket, just in case.

Mason and Nolan were suited up in heavy work gear and wore tool belts slung over their shoulders. Oxygen pills protected them from the hard vacuum and radiation of space.

“Looks like it was probably hit by a rock fragment sir,” Mason said as he crouched down on the hull, “There’s a dent in the plating here, restricting the fuel flow. We can fix it by a re-route through another conduit. Five minute job, maybe ten.”

“You think it was just an accident then?” asked Richards

Mason took a wrench from his belt, “Sure Mister Richards, it happens, particularly outside the authorized space-lanes. Tends to be more stray debris.”

Richards began to relax a little. Chen had made him jumpy. The stupid salesman was dead and he knew it.

“That’s strange...” Nolan said as he stooped to remove the damaged hull plate.

Richards had no time for delay, “What’s strange?” he demanded impatiently.

“Something wedged between the plates sir,” Nolan said as he pulled off one of his heavy gauntlets and prized the object free with his fingers. He held it

up, it was shaped like a shield. "It's some kind of badge... It says 'Special Agent' on it."

"General Zero... I'm picking up some kind of message on the neutroni sir."

"That's what the infernal thing is for Ninety!" Zero looked up from his desk, "I mean Lieutenant Drake. You kinda reminded me of him. That is... I mean..."

"I do understand sir. But General, this message, it's seems to be in code."

"Why didn't you say so?! Let me hear it."

"Yes sir," Drake quickly relayed the signal to Zero's console.

Zero listened. "World Space Patrol... World Space Patrol... Omega One." The words were followed by a long series of beeps and chirps before repeating.

"Where's it coming from Lieutenant?"

"Tracing it now, General. Got it. It's being broadcast from position one nine three zero."

"That ship's on the edge of the Solar System... Track it Lieutenant. Don't lose it."

"But what does it mean?"

"Big trouble for someone if they don't jump to it. Get a Light Patrol ship to investigate that craft right away."

"Yes sir! At once sir."

Zero snatched up his phone, "Computer room? Drop everything else, I have a top priority decoding job for you."

Master Astronaut Crosby circled his small patrol ship around a drifting spacecraft. "LP 14 to Space City, police cruiser appears fake, registry

numbers unlisted. Craft appears to have been abandoned. No sign of damage."

In the Space City control room Drake responded to the call, "Acknowledged LP14, proceed to source of radio transmission and identify."

General Zero was studying the large sector map in the control room. "This is going to be a longshot. Thanks to that coded message we now have a likely trajectory for the incoming alien craft, but it'll still be like looking for needles in a haystack."

"'Haystack' sir?"

"Just an expression. Meaning we have a very, very slim chance of intercepting the aliens before they get within firing range. But at least we now have that chance. Have you re-deployed all available XL patrol craft?"

"Yes sir. We have four ships heading to the rendezvous point. E.T.A.s between six and nine hours."

"Only four?"

"Yes sir, the only XL ships less than two days away sir. I've also had eight Light Patrol ships diverted to the rendezvous point. Was that right sir?"

"You bet Lieutenant. But if the experts are right, that still isn't going to be enough. Round up all the freighters and tankers we have, get them fully loaded with fuel and missiles. We've got to give those ships all the support we can muster."

"But what about the schedules sir?"

"Lieutenant Drake, if the Solar System is destroyed, there won't be any schedules."

"I'll get on it right away sir."

"Oh, Lieutenant Drake, while you are doing that have XL23 prepared for immediate launch."

"Yes Commander, er General."

"Think you're ready to handle an emergency?"

"I think so sir."

"Good. I think so too. I'll want you to coordinate things from here. I'll be taking XL23 up, as soon as I've rounded up a crew."

Shafts of brilliant sunlight danced across the contours of Stingray's glistening hull, as the submarine rocked gently on the surface of the calm blue alien ocean.

Captain Troy Tempest was sitting at the sub's controls, carefully making systems checks. He was still wearing the now decidedly disreputable grey overalls — a stark reminder of his recent captivity.

So, here he was, many lightyears from Earth, on a strange water-world, with a job to do. Somewhere, way down in the ocean depths, Marina had discovered an evil menace intent on destroying all life on Earth. It was time for Aquanaut Troy Tempest to earn his month's pay, by taking Stingray on a seek-and-destroy mission. Life in the World Aquanaut Security Patrol certainly wasn't dull...

A few hundred yards away from Stingray, Fireball Junior was beginning her take-off run. Troy watched as she ploughed effortlessly through the waves, rapidly gaining speed and sending up a huge plume of white spray. "Marina! Will you look at that!"

Now the red and silver spacecraft was lifting out of the water, skimming across the waves. Rocket engines roared into life as Fireball Junior hurled herself into the clear turquoise skies, and in an instant was gone from sight.

“Boy!” Troy breathed, as the echoes of the rocket blast died away, “That was one heck of a sight!”

Marina turned and nodded her agreement from the co-pilot’s seat. She was self-consciously adjusting her tattered overalls into some semblance of respectability.

Troy brushed at his own ‘uniform’ in a gesture of mutual feelings, “We’ll change out of these rags when we get time Marina. Stand by to dive...”

Marina picked up the hydrophone headset — almost gingerly, and pulled it on.

Troy noticed the girl’s concerned expression and immediately guessed what she must be thinking.

“Don’t worry about Phones; he’s in good hands. That crazy mind control stuff will wear off - just like it did on me.”

Again Marina nodded, but this time she returned his smile. Sometimes it seemed to her that Troy could read her thoughts just as well as any Pacifican.

Jacob Richards pulled the blaster from his pocket and released the safety catch, “You two hurry and get that fuel line fixed. I’m going to take a look around.”

Mason looked up uneasily, “You think Smith is out here?”

“No. He probably did this before the lounge was depressurised. But I’ll take a look just in case he survived.”

Richards looked warily about him as he moved cautiously along the Lady Anne’s upper hull, his magnetic boots clanging with each step as they gripped the walkway. He paused for a moment to listen. He could hear no sounds at all, aside from his breathing. The oxygen pills provided only a

limited energy field for sound to travel in, only a matter of a few yards. He'd have to rely on what he could see. There was very little to see up here on the elevated propulsion housing. The sleek design of the yacht provided little cover for a saboteur toy salesman. As he looked down over the smooth hull of the ship at a small cluster of storage modules he tried to shrug off the feeling that he was being watched. There was no-one down there. He was wasting valuable time. Pressing a stud on his belt radio he called up Mason, "Have you finished the repairs yet?"

After a few seconds Mason responded, "Almost completed, Mr. Richards."

"When you're done meet me at the starboard airlock. I'm heading there now." Richards switched off the radio and started to make his way over the hull towards the starboard side of the ship.

The radio on his belt buzzed.

Richards continued to walk as he toggled the radio back on, "Yes? What is it Mason? Are you done?"

"Hello," said an all too familiar voice, "I'm afraid it's me Mr Richards..."

Thinking Twenty One must be behind him, Richards swung around, gun levelled.

There was nobody there.

The airlock wasn't far, but he'd have to deal with the salesman or face more humiliation —or worse — from Chen. He was well aware that Chen thought he was no longer useful.

Richards activated his radio again, "Mason? Nolan? Do you hear me?"

"Of course Mr. Richards," Mason replied "All finished here. About to head back to the airlock."

"Listen Mason, he's out here somewhere. Smith or whatever his name is."

"Where did you see him?"

"I didn't, he cut in on the radio frequency. Keep your eyes peeled and your guns ready."

"You bet. We're on our way Mr. Richards."

Crosby slowed the speed of his small spacecraft as he carefully adjusted his astroscope. Then he switched on his neutroni radio, "LP14 to Space City..."

Back on Earth, Lieutenant Drake was quick to answer the call.

"Space City receiving LP14. Go ahead."

"I've reached the area of the transmission source Lieutenant. There's no sign of a ship. This is odd. Scanners are detecting debris, but the signal is still strong."

"Acknowledged LP14. Can you identify debris?"

"Making visual contact now... I see bodies. Four, could be five... Small pieces of wreckage of some kind... Not enough for a ship. Space City, I've located transmission source, seems to be a small metallic box, approximately 1 metre in length... Looks like a briefcase."

"Looks like we have company back there..." the Lady Anne's pilot said as he tried to boost his scanners.

"Probably the Space Patrol answering that radio message," said the navigator.

"More than likely Dave. I think we'll be ending the trip here, at least for a while. They'll want an explanation regarding the accident."

“On the contrary Mr. Archer,” Chen said as he stepped onto the flight deck, “We won’t be making any stops on this trip. I suggest you apply maximum power and leave any possible inconveniences behind us.”

“That’ll be up to Mr. Richards sir,” the pilot said uncomfortably, “He’s still out there.”

Chen leaned casually on the back of the pilot’s seat, “Tell me, and are the repairs complete?”

“Yes sir. Mr. Richards and his team are on their way back to the airlock.”

Richards was turning his radio off when Chen’s voice cut in, “Richards, I understand from your pilot that the repairs are now completed. There’s a patrol ship nosing around the lounge debris. I would very much like this ship to be underway. Immediately.”

Troy had finally completed Stingray’s pre-dive checks, “Time for us to head for cover before those mined space-subs start detonating... All hatches secure... Flood Q. Dive, dive, dive!”

As Marina operated the buoyancy controls, Troy put Stingray into a steep spiral dive, “Rate one... Rate two...” Troy was in his element - even if he was on an alien world. He glanced at the supersub’s chronometer, “Let’s see now, twenty-three marine miles away... Brace for impact Marina. I reckon the first shock-waves will hit us any time... Now!”

Troy gripped the controls tightly as Stingray shuddered violently, “Adjust trim... Green one five. Help me keep her steady Marina. The island will shield us from most of the turbulence... I hope...”

Troy extended Stingray’s landing skids and the submarine pancaked down onto the rocky seabed. There was noise now — or the sensation of noise, of pressure. Stingray began to rock from side to side.

Marina adjusted her hydrophones as Troy anxiously watched the gauges on his control panel, “Pressure on the hull is increasing but the compensators are holding up — so far...”

Marina turned to Troy, pointing to her hydrophones.

“What is it Marina?”

The girl made a motion with her hands, rolling them around each other.

“Waves? A Tsunami?”

Marina nodded and moved her hands further apart, still rotating them.

“Big one uh? I guess that takes care of all that alien equipment up there on the island. Gee I’m real glad you and the Colonel stopped by to pick us all up...”

As Fireball Junior sped rapidly away from the alien water-world, Colonel Steve Zodiac was keeping an anxious eye on the central viewer as he squeezed maximum acceleration from the ship’s motors.

“No sign of pursuit from the planet, Robert. Guess we beat them at their own game...”

Robert made no comment in response, he wasn’t programmed for general conversation. The robot simply processed Steve’s words, and detecting no direct orders, discarded them.

At the sound of a warning beep from the instrument panel, Steve toggled his display screen and studied the numerical data that scrolled up the screen. “There go the fireworks, bang on schedule!”

Now any immediate danger seemed to be over, Steve turned his attention to other matters.

“Robert, I’m going aft to check on Venus and the WASP guy. Maintain current velocity and maintain scanning.”

Robert confirmed his orders immediately, “Maintain current velocity... Maintain scanning...”

Master Astronaut Crosby had left his patrol ship and was out in space carefully controlling his thruster pack to pick his way through the floating debris. His orders were to recover the brief case containing the transmitter, but he’d have to check the bodies for signs of life first. He kicked his legs and accelerated towards the nearest of them. It looked like a woman...

As Jacob Richards got within sight of the open airlock door, he was relieved to see Mason and Nolan making their way over the Lady Anne’s hull towards him.

“Hurry it up!” he shouted uselessly. They were only thirty feet away now but well out of range of the energy field generated by the oxygen pills.

Seeing that Richards was shouting to him, Mason activated his radio, “Have you seen Smith?”

Richards shook his head, pointing to his radio with his hand.

Mason got the message, he quickly clicked off his radio.

Richards hurried, as best he could with his magnetic boots, over to join Mason and Nolan. “We have to get underway at once. There’s a Space Patrol ship closing fast.”

“What about the spy guy?” Nolan asked, looking around warily.

“He won’t survive the acceleration G-forces. Come on, we have to get back inside quickly.” said Richards

As the three men began walking towards the airlock something whistled past Nolan's ear. "What the heck was that?"

"I saw a muzzle flash!" Mason pointed, "Over there! The storage area..."

Richards stared, "There was no-one out there..."

"Well," Mason observed, "There is now... We'd better get behind some cover!"

Quickly Richards and his men scrambled down behind a large communications dish.

"But I thought you were in a hurry Mr. Richards?" Twenty One's voice taunted over the radio.

There was a sharp clang as another projectile struck the radio dish.

Ready this time, Mason fired his blaster towards where he'd seen the flash. A piece of superstructure buckled.

"Missed!" Twenty One observed smugly over the radio. "You do realise you nearly did hit a fuel tank though?"

"Damn him! We can't risk destroying the ship." Richards spared a glance towards the inviting open airlock,

"Nolan," he said hurriedly, "Go along the underside of the ship, and get behind him. Keep your radio off until he's dealt with. Quickly man!"

Against the port bulkhead of Fireball Junior's jetmobile bay, Doctor Venus and Lieutenant 'Phones' Sheridan lay on stretchers. They didn't stir as Steve entered. The close range stun effects of the coma-ray would last for several more hours.

Steve took pillows and blankets from a storage locker and tried to make his two unconscious passengers as comfortable as he could.

“Sorry Venus...” he said quietly as he covered the sleeping doctor with a blanket, “I can’t bring you out of the coma yet - no telling how you’d react.”

As Steve lifted Venus’s head onto a pillow, his fingers felt something small and cold at the back of her neck. He frowned as he gently probed around the area. There was something under the girl’s skin at the base of her skull...

Crosby didn’t have to spend much time examining three of the four bodies, they were all obviously very dead.

One man was alive. Crosby slowed his thruster-pack as he drew closer to him, “World Space Patrol. Hold on buddy I’ll get you back to my ship.”

The man smiled weakly, “Good to see you Spaceman... Thought I was going to die out here for sure. You have a Fireball ship?”

“Not me Buddy. Light Patrol ship. No worries I’ll get you back to Earth in no time.”

“But we can’t go back to Earth! We have to get away!” said the survivor.

“Sorry sir, local trips only in my little ship. Just don’t have the range.”

“Listen, you don’t understand...”

“Easy Admiral,” Crosby said gently, “You may be in shock. We’ll talk after I get you safely aboard.”

“Admiral?”

Putting one of the man’s arms across his shoulder, Crosby headed back towards his craft. He kept one hand on his ray gun... Just in case.

“He may have us pinned down,” Richards told Mason as another shot ricocheted off a support pylon, “But he’s in the same position as us. If he

moves away from the storage pods he'll be out in the open and an easy target."

The two men watched and waited as precious minutes ticked by.

"Mason, if Nolan doesn't call soon we'll have to take a chance and rush to the airlock..."

"Rush?" Mason replied, "In these magnetic boots?"

Mason was suddenly alarmed to feel the plates beneath his feet starting to vibrate, "The engines! Mr. Richards they're powering up!"

"Archer!" Richards shouted into his radio, "What the devil are you playing at?"

"I'm obeying orders sir..."

"I gave no order!"

"No Mr. Richards," Chen said coldly over the radio, "I did. You have three minutes to get back aboard before the main engines fire."

The radio clicked off.

"Mason..." said Richards urgently, "You keep me covered while I get to the airlock."

Before Mason could reply, Nolan's voice cut in over the radio, "Sir, there's nobody up here."

"What? Are you sure Nolan?"

"Yes sir, I've been all around the storage area, nobody here."

Nolan suddenly turned as he heard a whirring noise nearby and then there was a bang.

Richards saw the flash and aimed his blaster.

“Don’t shoot Mr. Richards! You’ll hit Nolan!”

Richards kept his gun trained on the storage area, “What the devil is going on over there Nolan?”

“It’s... Some kind of tank.”

“What are you blathering about?” Richards snapped, “Of course there are tanks up there!”

“No sir, it’s a little military tank... I mean it looks like a child’s toy.”

“The Granatoid Tank...” Twenty One chimed in helpfully over the radio, “One of our top selling items. Fully radio controlled with magnetic tracks... Oh gosh, just look at the time. Sorry I’ll have to leave you now.”

Richards felt a chill run down his spine. He turned around to see Twenty One standing in the airlock waving cheerily as the door closed.

On the Lady Anne’s flight deck Chen calmly watched the ship’s chronometer as the last second ticked by.

“Airlock door closed sir,” the co-pilot reported.

“Full power.”

“Full power Sir,” Archer acknowledged.

The Lady Anne’s main engines thundered, sending the ship surging forwards.

“How very fortunate they were punctual. I so hate dining alone. Change our heading to three one four, zero green and maintain velocity until I give further orders.” said Chen as he left the flight deck.

Lieutenant Drake watched the tiny points of light on the sector map, deep in thought. Slowly but steadily Zero’s task force was nearing the edge of explored space. Even now the routine neutroni radio check-in calls were

taking hours to reach Space City, soon the ships would disappear off the map and be out of radio contact.

“LP14 to Space City.”

Drake turned to her assistant, “I’ll handle that Harris. Go ahead LP14.”

“Lieutenant, I have the brief case and one survivor. He says he was involved in an accident on the Lady Anne, a space yacht. I’m not detecting any vessels in the area.”

“How is the survivor?”

“A little dazed and confused otherwise seems to be okay. I’ve identified him as Admiral Beatty, sir. I’ve taken the precaution of securing him.”

“Understood LP14. Return to Space City. Another ship will be assigned to look for the Lady Anne.”

“Roger Space City. On my way.”

Lieutenant Drake picked up her telephone, “Put me through to General Rossiter, priority alpha.”

Stingray was speeding through the alien ocean, keeping close to the seabed. Marina was sure they were now in the right area; she waved a hand to signal to Troy to reduce speed.

“Okay Marina. Let’s go find that monster fish’s lair.”

Marina carefully scanned the alien seabed looking for anything she could recognise from her previous visit to the fish god’s cave. She soon spotted a familiar rock formation and pointed towards it.

Troy trusted Marina’s sense of direction and eye-sight more than Stingray’s instruments in this strange ocean. He turned Stingray onto a new heading and followed Marina’s directions.

When Chen reached the airlock he found that someone was waiting for him.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you Mr. Chen."

"Ah," Chen smiled, "you must be the toy salesman."

The man nodded but didn't return the smile, "You can call me Twenty One."

"I have heard so much about you and your activities here. Perhaps you would care to join me later, for dinner? I assume there will be three more empty chairs?"

Twenty One shrugged, "This ship did leave in something of a hurry. You may well have lost a few passengers."

"Most regrettable. I shall have words with our vessel's pilot." Chen smiled again. "Dinner will be at eight. He looked at his watch, "in fifty five minutes to be precise. Unless you are going to attempt to arrest me, in which case dinner may well be delayed."

Twenty One nodded, "We have a dinner date then."

"Excellent. You will find the dining room opposite the lounge, which I believe you are already familiar with. I am told the lounge has a few broken windows, but otherwise please feel free to roam any areas of the ship you have not already visited. Oh, and for your information this yacht is now on full automatic pilot to our destination."

"A Chen Industries product?"

"Indeed. I don't like to call it artificial intelligence as the real item seems in short supply. You'll find radio communications impossible. Not my doing. We are well outside the space lanes and there are no neutroni relay boosters out here."

When Twenty One entered the dining room fifty-five minutes later Chen was already seated at the large table.

"Please be seated, Twenty One. Over dinner I assume you wish for me to attempt to help you with your enquiries? Unless, you wish to sell me some of your charming little toys of course."

Twenty One pulled up a chair opposite Chen. "I know a little about you Mr. Chen Shun. Multi-billionaire industrialist. The man behind the Zofeit invasion?"

"Ah, straight to the point. But you are guessing of course."

"Of course."

"You will find the menu is fairly cosmopolitan, something for all tastes. Just key in the associated codes. Jacob told me about the little discussion he had with you earlier. I can assure you that I played no part in the Zofeit affair. Zofeit is, incidentally, outside of United Planets Jurisdiction, and therefore outside of the Universal Secret Service's sphere of operations."

Chen paused as a panel in the table slid smoothly aside and a plate of fruit and vegetables emerged, complete with cutlery and condiments.

Chen picked up a napkin. "An Olympian speciality. My company offered a very fair price for the Zofeit technology. Unfortunately the Zofeit Government chose to decline my offer."

"So you took it by force." suggested the USS agent.

"Twenty One I urge you to have whatever you like. We now have more than enough food for everyone. No, Chen Industries simply provided ships and specialised equipment to an expanding Aquaphibian civilization which happened to be looking for a new world to colonize. Our customer generously gave us the exclusive rights to all Zofeit technology once they had taken over the planet."

"And then you developed and sold them the Zofeit nuclear retardant ray?"

"Indeed. Our Aquaphibian friends were only too pleased to buy the submarine spacecraft and integrated ray weapons we produced to their specifications. Of course, once items have been purchased our only concern is to honour our guarantees and warranties and hope for further custom in the future. If you will forgive me for saying so, unlike the USS, we do not pry into other people's business."

"When there's an attack on the Solar System it is our business Mr. Chen."

"Not an attack. More the complete annihilation of the system, I understand. Do have some Earth food, I have it on authority that it's going to become very scarce. I must stress Twenty One, Chen Industries has no involvement in this affair either, save for constructing the ships and equipment of course."

"So, what happens now?"

"Good choice, the beef is quite delicious. Happens to us? Hopefully nothing distressing. We have a journey of several days ahead of us. You may have Admiral Beatty's accommodation. It is unused and he won't be needing it now."

"Where are we heading?" asked Twenty One.

"We are heading for Zofeit" said Chen "Once we have arrived I will introduce you to my customers. I'm sure they will want to question you. The secrets you carry in your head must be priceless."

"What do you hope to gain from the destruction of the Solar System?"

"Power my dear Twenty One. Power"

"The first opportunity I get I will take over this ship and throw you out of one of the airlocks"

“But then you would not have the pleasure of visiting my fully automated deep sea construction site on Zofeit. Whether I am alive or dead it will still be able to supply the Aquaphibians with all the space craft and weapons they need to take over this part of the Galaxy.”

“You are mad Mr. Chen. Quite mad.”

“Just shut up and enjoy your meal Twenty One” snapped Chen. “You cannot contact Earth and if you try to change the course we are now on my yacht will self-destruct”

Twenty One decided to bide his time until they reached Zofeit.

In Fireball XL5’s navigation bay Professor Matthew Matic frowned as he studied the data on his spacemograph. He’d located an incoming spacecraft, but was it friend or foe?

Zoonie was bouncing up and down on the seat next to him as he rotated the desk, happily chanting “Welcome home... welcome home.”

“Simmer down Zoonie, I’ve gotta be sure.” As the Professor began operating the controls of the astroscope, a tiny speck of light on the screen gradually became clearly visible and grew until the outline of a spacecraft appeared.

The Professor spoke excitedly into the radio, “Ninety, it’s Fireball Junior right enough.”

“That’s boss Professor,” Lieutenant Ninety responded from Fireball XL1, “He’s still maintaining radio silence — guess our troubles aren’t over...”

“Nope,” Matt agreed, “I reckon they’re just beginning... Keep those missiles ready... just in case...”

Steve Zodiac adjusted the image on his view-screen to bring it into sharp focus. There was Fireball XL1 and close by was the main section of XL5. Both

ships had their missile racks extended. Steve decided it was high time to break radio silence. "Fireball Junior to Fireball XL5, Steve Zodiac calling..."

"Steve!" Matt replied instantly over the neutroni radio, "I've been monitoring massive explosions on the water-world..."

"Yeah. That was no under-water city, it was an enemy fleet, about a hundred ships..."

"The generator ships?"

"Sure looked that way Matt. Listen, I found Venus and she'll be okay."

"Is she injured?"

"Coma-stun. Got a WASP guy here in the same condition. Stand by to reconnect."

Professor Matic was already waiting in Fireball Junior's jetmobile bay when Steve entered. "Steve, what happened to Venus? Was she like this when you found her?"

"No Matt, I, I had to stun her with my ray gun. She's under some kind of hypnotic control, the WASP guy too. They tried to kill us..."

"Us?"

"Yeah. I found Stingray and her crew. Help me get Venus and the Lieutenant down to the medical bay, I'll tell you what happened."

Steve felt a tug on his sleeve. It was Zoonie. The lazoon put his head next to Venus's as she lay unmoving on the stretcher. He made low whimpering noises.

Steve patted the lazoon gently, "Easy boy, she's just sleeping."

Zoonie refused to be comforted and continued to make unhappy sounds.

Steve frowned, "I think Zoonie is worried about that hypnosis; being telepathic, he can sense she's not right."

"Or maybe he's just picking up your own anxiety Steve..."

Steve and Matt pushed the two anti-grav stretchers down Fireball's corridors, with Zoonie trailing behind, still whimpering quietly.

Once they had strapped Phones and Venus onto the beds in the medical bay and made them as comfortable as possible, Steve and Matt left them to sleep.

Zoonie watched anxiously as Steve closed and locked the medical bay door.

Matt put a comforting hand on the lazoona's shoulder, "She'll be fine Zoonie." He frowned, "Steve, do we really need to keep them unconscious and locked up like this?"

"It's for the best Matt, believe me." Steve quickly briefed Matt on how he had found Stingray and with Marina's help, had rescued the crew and Doctor Venus. "We've got to prepare for battle... We mined some of those ships — but I reckon enough of them will be lifting off soon to give us plenty of trouble.

"Steve, even a handful of those ships could still destroy Earth's Sun. It'd be a tricky business to just cool the sun for a short time and then restore it to normal. Take a lot of power. But my guess is that they'll settle for a random breakdown in the Sun's nuclear reactions. Gravitational forces would cause the Sun to implode. It'd turn into a white dwarf or maybe even a black hole."

"We'll have to knock out as many of those ships as we can, as they leave the planet. Matt... I want you to get over to XL1. Ninety will need help to get the best out of that ship. I've got Robert to help me."

"Sure thing Steve. I'll get over there right away.

Zoonie stood quietly watching as the two men hurried away.

Aboard the LP14, Master Astronaut Crosby's passenger was protesting.

"There's really no need for these restraints Spaceman. You know who I am."

"Yes sir. Admiral sir. Orders sir."

"What orders?" Beatty demanded angrily.

"A Code 5 sir."

"And just what in blue blazes is a Code 5?"

"Basically that would be: 'Shoot on sight, take no chances' ... Sir."

"Space City to LP14..."

Crosby was relieved at the chance to talk to someone else, "LP14. Go ahead Space City."

"LP14, divert to course zero zero three, zero blue."

"Roger Space City. Zero zero three, zero blue. LP14 out.""

"Where are we going?"

"You're in luck Admiral. We're not going to Earth after all. We're going to Mars."

Fireball XL1 and Fireball XL5 sped together through the alien solar system, heading sunwards towards the fourth planet. Although there had been massive hydromic explosions on the seabed there was no telling how many of the generator ships had survived.

In Fireball XL1's navigation bay, Matt had been keeping a watchful eye on his astroscope.

“Steve!” he called urgently, “Ships leaving the planet... Position Code: one, five, zero-blue. Range: ninety- four, twenty-three.”

At XL5’s controls, Steve Zodiac watched the central viewer as Matt relayed the data and images. “I see them Matt,” he acknowledged. “I count four. Battle Procedures! Matt, Ninety, take your oxygen pills.”

Matt made some quick calculations. “They’re headed out of the system Steve — on a direct heading for Earth...”

“Plot us an intercept course Matt. We have to stop those ships at all costs. They’ll use whatever they’ve got against Earth.”

“Colonel,” Ninety asked anxiously, “shouldn’t we warn Commander Zero?”

“Surprise is all we’ve got Lieutenant. If we send out neutroni transmissions we’ll give away our position.” said Steve.

The two Fireball spacecraft were soon moving off on an intercept course, the distance between the two ships increasing to about three miles.

A part of Steve’s mind never stopped thinking about Venus. Had he come all this way, found her against unbelievable odds - only to die with her? At least, he told himself, if they failed, she would never know about it.

“Steve!” Professor Matic called urgently, “Three more ships leaving the planet!”

“Make every missile count guys - let’s go!” Steve turned to his co-pilot, “Robert... Stand by interceptors one and two.”

“Standing by...”

As Stingray dived ever deeper down into an undersea trench, Marina was listening intently to her hydrophones, as if feeling her way along the dark steep rocky walls.

Troy found himself wondering how Marina perceived the ocean depths. Did she rely on sound as much as sight? He really knew so little about this girl from under the sea.

All of a sudden Marina found what she'd been searching for. She pointed excitedly to a large opening in the rocky cliff, about a hundred yards ahead.

Troy turned Stingray around and brought her down onto the seabed about a quarter of a mile from the cave. "I guess we could just destroy that cave, but we don't know if the creature is there. We have to be certain..."

Marina nodded.

"You'd better stay here while I go and scout around," said Troy.

Shaking her head, Marina picked up the alien rifle that she'd recently put to so much good use.

"Okay Marina, I guess we'll go together."

The Red Planet filled the viewport of Crosby's cockpit as he awaited landing clearance.

"I demand to know where you are taking me Crosby."

"That's Master Astronaut Crosby, Admiral. I'm afraid whilst you are under arrest you are in no position to demand anything."

Soon the Light Patrol craft was descending down to the outskirts of an airfield some miles outside the Martian colony's capital city of Kahra.

"We must be in the middle of nowhere." Beatty declared as he looked around at the bleak featureless landscape.

"Oh most of Mars looks like this sir. You'll need an oxygen mask when we exit my craft. The air's still pretty thin."

“And then?”

“There’s your answer Admiral.” Crosby pointed out to what might have been a desert track. A large black hover limousine was speeding over the Martian sands to meet them.

Crosby opened the outer hatch and helped the handcuffed Beatty to walk down LP14’s short boarding ramp. The air, such that it was, felt cold. Crosby hoped he wouldn’t have to be out there long.

The car drew up alongside and settled down to the ground with a soft hissing sound. Three men, all wearing masks, dark business suits and even darker glasses, emerged from the car and walked briskly over. One of the men flashed an ID wallet at Crosby, “Gray. Okay Astronaut Crosby, we’ll take over now. You have the case?”

“Certainly. I’ll get it.”

With Beatty in the safe hands of the three men, Crosby stepped back inside his ship, returning a few moments later with the metallic briefcase. Beatty was already being helped into the rear compartment of the car by two of the men.

Crosby noticed that aside from the driver’s screen, the car windows were all as dark as the men’s sunglasses. Gray took the chrome coloured briefcase from Crosby. “I’m afraid the Admiral won’t be doing any sight-seeing on this trip.”

In Fireball XL5’s medical bay, Zoonie had opened the locked door and was sitting quietly beside Venus as she lay unconscious on the bed. He was holding the Doctor’s hand in one of his large paws.

“Zoonie?” Venus murmured quietly, as if in a deep sleep. Her eyes remained closed. She didn’t move.

“Follow me... Follow me...” Zoonie chanted softly. He lifted his other paw and placed his sucker like finger tips gently against the woman’s head. “Follow me... Follow me...”

In Fireball XL1’s navigation bay, Professor Matic was staring anxiously at the spacemograph as eight colossal alien space ships moved rapidly away from their water-world base.

“Steve,” he called over the ship to ship channel, “I think they’ve spotted us — they’re keeping out of range...”

“Okay, this is it, we’re going in. We’ve got to take out as many of those ships as we can...”

“Roger, Steve,” Ninety replied from the controls of XL1, “If the mountains won’t come to Mohammed...”

Steve smiled to himself, he was seeing Ninety in a different light.

“Full boost. Fire a spread of interceptors at the lead ships as soon as we are at extreme range. We have to get their attention or we’ll lose them — those ships can outrun us for sure.”

The two World Space Patrol ships blasted into action like the Fireballs they were named for and soon interceptor missiles were streaking towards the alien attack fleet.

“No effect!” Ninety gasped as the alien ships were bathed in nutomic explosions, “They aren’t even slowing down...”

Professor Matic swung his circular desk around to face a large screen on the wall. He hastily began studying a mass of data. “It’s got to be some kind of energy shield... Ionised plasma...”

“What can we do Matt?” Steve asked urgently.

“A plasma shield can only absorb so much, it’s like a sponge. We have to saturate it with energy.”

“Colonel!” Lieutenant Ninety called. “The ships are accelerating — pulling away!”

Troy and Marina swam together as they made their way to the undersea cave. When they were only a few yards from the cave mouth, Marina gestured that they should stop. She put her head on one side as if listening. She was trying to locate the alien sea creature’s telepathic thoughts. After a long minute she turned back to Troy, shaking her head.

Troy put a hand on Marina’s shoulder, “I guess we’ll have to go and search inside. We have to know if it’s in there. Don’t take any chances. If we spot it we’ll get back to Stingray and use the sting-missiles.”

Troy was beginning to feel uneasy. He didn’t know what to expect to find lurking in the darkness. Some kind of alien sea monster. Something terrifying that was for sure. He imagined a grotesque squid-like creature with dozens of tentacles and hideous fanged jaws and hundreds of staring eyes. He shuddered.

As they swam into the cave, Troy switched on his flashlight. He’d faced enough danger in his career. He’d see this through, destroy the hideous creature. It wasn’t going to frighten him.

The black hover limousine drew to a halt in the car park of Century 21 Toys Incorporated, settling gently on to the ground. The engine fell silent.

Beatty was growing increasingly nervous as he stared at the black windows, “Where are we?”

“At our destination” one of the men sitting beside Beatty offered. It was the first time either of the men had spoken a word to him.

There was a slight jolt and Beatty felt the car start to descend.

After a minute or two there was another jolt.

Gray swung open the car door and a cold, bright light streamed into the car’s dimly lit interior. “End of the line, Admiral.”

Beatty was escorted through a door into a long, narrow, empty corridor.

“This way Admiral,” Gray ordered, as he headed briskly down the corridor without looking back.

Beatty was forced to reluctantly follow, escorted by his two companions, who each firmly held one of his arms. Several steel doors hissed closed behind the four men as they walked, their footsteps echoing noisily on the bare concrete floor.

At the end of the corridor there was an oak panelled door. It swung silently open at their approach. Gray turned and nodded to his two colleagues and one of the men removed Beatty’s handcuffs.

“In there.” Gray said, pointing to the doorway, and giving Beatty a firm push on the shoulders. Rubbing his wrists, Beatty walked through the open door, which immediately closed behind him.

“Increase velocity to maximum!” Steve ordered, “If those generator ships start projecting the nuclear retardant into the Sun then Earth, Mars and the whole Solar System will be wiped out!”

Steve watched as the huge ships moved further away. “They’re getting away — heading out of the system!”

Matt looked up in alarm when a red warning light flashed on his console, “Ninety! There’s a malfunction in Junior’s docking clamps!”

“It’s no malfunction Professor... I’m going to slow those ships down...” Ninety gunned Fireball Junior’s engines and blasted clear of the main body of Fireball XL1.

“Ninety!” Steve yelled as he realised what the young lieutenant was planning. “Don’t do it! We’ll find another way...”

“There’s no time Colonel... I’m going to fly this crate right into those killer ships...”

Steve felt his blood run cold as he watched his monitor screen. Ninety’s ship was rapidly converging with the aliens. “Matt...” he said helplessly...

“He’s right Steve... We can’t stop them with our interceptors. There’s not enough time!”

“Ninety!” Steve called desperately over the radio, “Eject! Get out of that ship!”

Ninety heard Steve’s voice and smiled grimly to himself. It seemed not so long ago he was telling Steve to do the same thing... Eject! Eject! He felt very calm, very detached — and very determined. If these ships destroyed Earth... then they destroyed his life too. He had no choice. He reached out a hand and turned off the radio. “Goodbye Steve... Everyone...” he said quietly.

On the central display screen digits were rapidly counting down.

“Warning: Fifteen nutomic warheads are armed.”

“Radiation Hazard: Nutomic motors are overloaded.”

Steve Zodiac was using all of his piloting skills to close the gap between XL5 and Ninety’s ship. “Robert, maintain course...”

“Maintain course...” Robert acknowledged.

Suddenly Ninety’s ship erupted in a gigantic ball of super-heated plasma. Steve gripped the controls tightly as he felt himself pulled to one side as XL5’s artificial gravity failed. Then something hard struck the side of his head. He fell into unconsciousness.

In Fireball XL1 Matt watched in awe as a chain reaction built up. Three of the alien vessels exploded into nothingness, two more tumbled into each other and burst into flame.

“Steve!” Matt exclaimed as he saw Fireball XL5 tumbling away from the point of impact.

