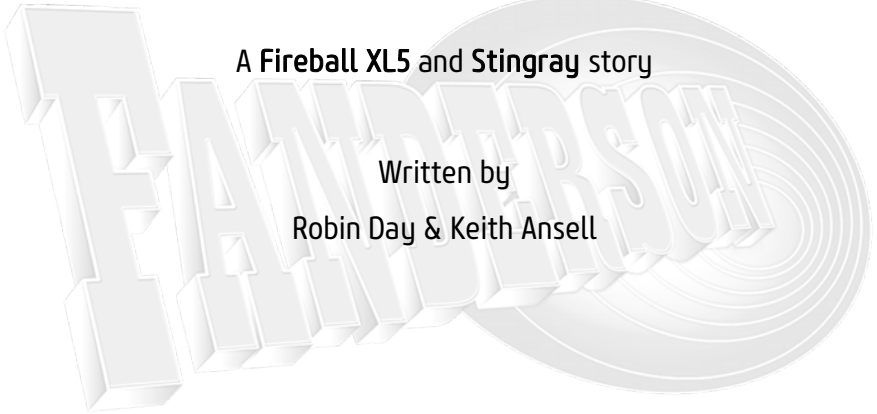


# LIKE ICE IN THE SUN

A Fireball XL5 and Stingray story

Written by

Robin Day & Keith Ansell



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## **Chapter 1**

### **Evening Star**

Atlanta Shore stood by her car, waiting to greet her father as his aircraft landed at the floodlit Marineville airfield. A gentle night breeze ruffled her auburn hair. She loved Marineville, it was her home. Although it was a military base, the World Aquanaut Security Patrol's centre of operations, it was also a very pleasant self-contained town in its own right situated near the Pacific coast of the United States.

Atlanta watched as Commander Sam Shore's distinctive hover chair emerged from the plane, and headed towards her across the tarmac. "Hello father!" she called, hurrying forward to meet him.

"Hello Honey," the Commander said warmly as he steered his hover chair over to her. "It's good to be home. A few days at HQ seems like a month!"

Atlanta gave her father a hug. "How did things go in Washington?" she asked as she helped the Commander into her car.

"Oh... Lots of talk — as usual".

Atlanta stowed her father's hover chair and got into the car, "Anything interesting?"

"Well, the big news is that the World President is dissolving the World Security Patrol and closing HQ. I now report directly to the President, along with all the other section heads." Commander Shore sighed, "So I guess I'll be off to Unity City more often to attend meetings."

"But why?" Atlanta asked as she started the car.

“Oh, it’s all blamed on budget cuts, but between you and me, I think the President wants more direct control of the WASP and the World Navy, to allow him to push through some of his more radical plans.”

“Are they top secret ‘Radical Plans?’” Atlanta asked as she drove back towards their apartment.

“It is classified Atlanta...” Commander Shore chuckled, “But I guess I’m allowed to tell you. It seems, the WASP are going to be guinea pigs for some new underwater breathing drugs.”

“You mean like the Space Patrol’s oxygen pills?”

“Yeah... That’s the plan Atlanta. The World President is pressing for us to make more use of the oceans - and underwater breathing pills are the current bee in his bonnet.”

“Or is that,” Atlanta laughed, “WASP in his bonnet? Just imagine, without all that clumsy breathing gear, we could be living under water just like Marina’s people.”

“Yeah I guess that’s the ultimate goal... But I have my doubts it’ll work,” the Commander sighed. “Still, our orders are to give the project our full support.”

“And my orders are,” Atlanta told her father firmly, “that you relax, forget about work and enjoy the meal I’ve just cooked for you.”

The Commander put up his hands in surrender. “Message understood,” he grinned. “Proceeding With Orders Received, Lieutenant — I’m starving!”

-----

Several days later, two uniformed WASP officers were talking earnestly as they finished their breakfast in Marineville’s Tower Diner.

“Us Troy? Guinea pigs?” Lieutenant George Lee ‘Phones’ Sheridan asked, just a hint of concern colouring his Southern States accent.

“That’s the idea Phones.” Captain Troy Tempest shrugged, “You don’t have to volunteer with me if you don’t want to.”

“Hey, I’m with you Skipper. It just seems like a crazy idea.”

“Yeah... I know what you mean Phones. But Commander Shore wants us to be involved — so we can keep a close eye on the Space Patrol’s egghead. You know the Commander, he hates being kept in the dark about what happens on his own base.”

“But why all the secrecy Troy?”

“My guess is that it works this way. If the project is a success — the World President takes all the credit. If it fails... Well I guess there never was any such project — no egg on his face.” Troy grinned, “But I can’t say the same about you Phones...”

“Uh... Oh... Yeah.” Phones dabbed at his chin with a paper napkin, “Thanks Skipper.”

Troy gulped down the last of his coffee and checked his watch. “Between you and me Phones, the Commander is pretty sceptical about this whole business. But just think, if this idea works, we could be breathing under water just like Marina does.”

“Could be kinda fun Troy... I just hope it don’t turn our hair green!”

“Captain Tempest,” a voice on the wall speakers called. “Please report to the airfield, your transport jet is waiting for you.”

“See you later Phones. I’ll go pick up our egghead. Gee these eggheads all look the same,” Troy sighed as he grabbed his cap and headed for the door, “and talk the same.”

“Don’t forget Atlanta’s invited us over to dinner tonight Troy,” Phones called after him.

“I won’t Phones,” Troy waved as he left, “I wouldn’t miss Atlanta’s cooking for the world!”

Phones was thoughtful as he sat finishing his coffee. Was Troy ever going to make a choice between Marina and Atlanta? And how long was it going to be before the two girls fell out over Troy? Still, Phones would stick by Troy through fair weather and foul; he just hoped things would stay fair.

-----

Two hours later Troy Tempest arrived at the South Pacific Island that was home to Space City - headquarters of the World Space Patrol and the Earth’s gateway to the stars and planets. He’d glimpsed the WSP’s impressive control tower from the air as he’d brought his jet in to land. Now it dominated his vision as he was driven along the desert road towards it.

“Why does it do that?” he asked his driver.

“Do what sir?” she asked innocently.

“Why does the tower revolve like that?” Troy clarified. He’d read about Space City, he’d seen the odd TV documentary. Seeing the tower now though was awe-inspiring.

The driver considered thoughtfully for a moment, “Well Captain, I guess it’s to inspire awe.”

The car was soon drawing up at the steps to the tower entrance. The driver opened Troy’s door and smartly saluted. “You’ll find the Doctor’s office on the twelfth floor Captain. I’ll wait for you here sir.”

Still gazing up at the massive building as it turned effortlessly on its axis, Troy nearly tripped on the flight of steps.

“Careful Captain,” a young woman reached out a hand to steady him. “Your first visit to Space City?”

Troy smiled at the uniformed woman, embarrassed. “Yeah, this place sure is impressive.”

She smiled back, “Oh, we like it Captain.”

As Troy walked with her into the lobby, he observed that the girl was just as impressive as her surroundings.

“Twelfth floor?” she asked as they both entered an elevator.

“Er, yes... twelfth floor...” Troy found himself stammering as the door slid smoothly closed.

“Oh don’t be nervous Captain,” his companion grinned as the lift began its ascent. “The tower is perfectly safe.”

Troy glanced approvingly at the young woman standing beside him, and began to wish that he had more time to spend here at Space City.

“Here we are — Medical Centre,” the girl announced, as the elevator doors opened onto a brightly lit corridor.

“Thanks,” Troy acknowledged as they left the elevator, “Er... Nice meeting you.”

“My pleasure Captain. Now I just have to grab my bag... And then you can whisk me away back to your place.”

Troy wondered if he’d misheard, “Er... I’m here to pick up a scientist. A Doctor Venus...”

“Well, you have picked me up, Captain Tempest.” The girl smiled, “I must say I had heard of your reputation.”

Troy found himself off balance again...

-----

Surface Agent X2-Zero was not happy. He stood visibly cringing before the image of Titan on the huge monitor screen in his secret hideaway — a seemingly derelict old house on the otherwise barren Isle of Lemoy, situated only a few miles off the coast of California and relatively close to Marineville.

“Why,” the supreme ruler of the undersea city of Titanica demanded, “did you not report Tempest’s visit to the Terrainean base known as Space City?”

“I did not think it was important Your Majesty.”

“Important? I want to be informed when ANY member of the World Aquanaut Security Patrol visits that accursed island of lies. Do I make myself clear, X2-Zero?”

“Perfectly, Mighty One.”

“I want to know why Tempest flew to that devil’s isle.”

“I will go there at once,” X2-Zero said quickly, hoping to find approval with his lord and master.

“Fool! I already have a surface agent operating within Space City,” Titan said menacingly. “He reports that Tempest will soon be returning to Marineville, with a female doctor, to carry out certain experiments. You will gain access to Marineville and keep me informed on the progress of these... Experiments.”

X2-Zero could sense that Titan knew more than he had been told but he dare not ask any questions — that would be more than his life was worth. There was a strange look in Titan’s eyes as he cut the video link... Was it fear?

X2-Zero operated a control and watched as all of the electronic gadgets in the room were automatically concealed and replaced by drab furnishings



that matched the overall appearance of the old house. As the surface agent opened up the window shutters and daylight flooded into the room, he was deep in thought. How long had a surface agent been operating from Space City? Why was he always kept in the dark?

-----

Commander Shore looked just a little anxious as he waited in the Control Tower at Marineville. Atlanta tried to calm him down, “Father, please, it’s only another egghead.”

“Yeah, I know.” Shore spun his hover chair and began another brief trip to the other side of the control room before turning again. “They annoy me Atlanta. Why do they always have to be so peculiar; they give me the creeps. As soon as we’ve got through the formalities we’ll send him off to get on with his job. Hopefully he’ll keep out of our way.”

Atlanta turned to acknowledge an intercom message from the reception area, “Okay, thank you.”

“Is that...?” asked Commander Shore.

“Yes Father. Stand by for action! Troy and Doctor Venus are on their way up. Now just be civil — and don’t insult the poor guy.”

“Me?” asked Shore innocently.

The elevator door opened and they both turned to greet their boffin. Shore began his prepared welcome speech. “Welcome aboard Doctor Venus. I’m Commander Shore and... Er... Doctor Venus?”

“Thank you Commander Shore,” acknowledged Venus in her soft European accent.

“Er, yeah, right. Say, would you like to join us for dinner tonight Doctor?”

-----

Atlanta was muttering to herself as she worked in the kitchen of her Marineville apartment. "I'd better fix up an extra special dinner for tonight. Got to put on a good show. I wonder what Troy makes of the new 'egghead'... She's not quite what we were all expecting."

Sam Shore entered the kitchen, his hover chair gliding effortlessly across the floor. "Say Atlanta, I hope I didn't put your plans out by inviting Doctor Venus over for dinner."

"Oh of course not father. I was about to invite her myself. It'll be a real icebreaker for her. Troy, Phones and Marina are coming over this evening in any case."

"Yeah, that's how I figured it too." Commander Shore smiled, "You know, I might get to like having an egghead around here."

-----

By eight o'clock the four guests had arrived and were seated around the Shores' dining table enjoying an aperitif.

Sitting next to Commander Shore, Doctor Venus was feeling relieved to be made to feel so welcome at the WASP headquarters. She knew there was often a rivalry between the services — and sometimes it wasn't that friendly. "I must say Commander, it was very nice of you to invite me to join you all for dinner this evening."

"Just our way of saying welcome aboard Doctor," the Commander smiled. "Say, I hope you don't mind me asking, but are you French? I love your continental accent."

Venus smiled and shook her head, "No, of course I don't mind. And no, not French although I was raised in the South of France. Actually my father is Russian and my mother is Swiss."

Troy wanted to know all about this new 'egghead' himself, "So where were you actually born Doctor?"

"The planet Venus. You see my parents were working on one of those planetary research installations and I guess I arrived a little ahead of schedule."

"So you are that Venus!" Commander Shore exclaimed. "I remember reading all about that. It made the headlines back in..."

"Father!" Atlanta admonished him.

"2035." Venus informed them. "But I was too young at the time to read all those newspaper reports."

"A toast!" Troy declared, filling everyone's glass. "To our Venusian doctor of Space Medicine."

"To our star guest," echoed Commander Shore, Atlanta and Phones as they raised their glasses.

Marina picked up her own glass and smiled.

Venus laughed, "Thank you all so much." She looked across to Marina. "From what I've read, Marina, you are something of a celebrity yourself."

Marina smiled back but made no reply.

"That's right," Troy grinned. "Marina is a visitor from the undersea kingdom of Pacifica."

Troy put a hand on Marina's shoulder. "I guess you already know Marina doesn't talk; none of her people do."

"That's going to change Troy," Atlanta said as she put down her glass. "Marina was showing me a new gadget she's just received from her father in Pacifica. She can type into it in her language and it outputs in English."

“It does?” Troy asked almost choking on his glass of wine.

Marina nodded and smiled again.

“Once she gets the hang of using it,” Atlanta continued, “Marina can tell us all about her adventures on Stingray.”

Phones chuckled at the idea, “Say Troy, won’t that be just great!”

“Er, yeah...” Troy agreed, whilst taking the opportunity to flash Phones a warning glare. “That’s great news.”

Atlanta didn’t seem to notice Troy’s reaction - she was about to serve dinner. “Well, time for more talk later; now it’s time to eat!”

-----

After a delicious dinner and a little more wine, Venus was beginning to feel rather tired. “Atlanta, that was a really boss dinner. I hope you’ll all excuse me... It’s been rather a long day. I have to be up bright and early to supervise the installation of my scientific equipment at the hospital tomorrow.”

“I’ll get your coat,” said three male voices in unison.

“So eager to see me go?” teased Venus.

“I’ll walk back with you to your quarters”, Commander Shore said, as Troy went to fetch the Doctor’s coat.

“It’s really not necessary... But thank you Commander that would be most kind”.

After Commander Shore and Venus had left, Phones poured himself another cup of coffee, “I’d say the Commander is pretty impressed with our egghead...”

“Yes,” Atlanta agreed, a little irritably, “he does seem to be.”

Troy grinned, “Well she is very impressive... I mean... For an egghead...”

The door to the kitchen slammed and Atlanta was gone from the room.

“Now what did I say?”

Marina and Phones exchanged worried glances.

“Say Atlanta, let me give you a hand with the dishes,” Troy called as he opened the door and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Oh don’t worry Troy... It’s not as if I’ll lose my ring in the dishwasher.” A pile of crockery crashed into the machine.

“But Atlanta, you don’t wear a ring...”

Marina shook her head.

“Oh brother...” Phones muttered under his breath. “Guess we’re just gonna have to ride out the storm Marina.”

-----

X2-Zero had almost driven himself to despair over the last few hours trying to think of a disguise which would allow him to enter Marineville and carry out Titan’s instructions. He had managed to gain entry to the WASP base in the past but it was never easy — and he could not re-use any of his former aliases.

He needed a drink to steady his nerves — a strong drink.

He stared into his drinks cabinet and reached for a bottle.

Then a thought struck him... A thought, which made him cackle with delight. “Excellent!” he declared as he poured himself a large drink, “I’m a genius... A true genius.”

## **Chapter 2**

### **Creature from the Blue Lagoon**

Troy Tempest braced himself as he sat waiting, unable to move. A metal band had been secured around his forehead, and from it wires were connected to a grey box, which sat on the table in front of him. A finger was poised over a large red button. The finger stabbed downwards. “Ouch!” cried Troy as an electric shock surged through his body.

“Reflexes A-Okay Captain,” Doctor Venus told him as she walked over and unfastened the electrodes. “You are in excellent condition for the tests. We just have one thing to put right.”

“We do?” Troy asked, as he pulled on his uniform jacket. “What’s that Doctor?”

“Your diet. I’m afraid you’ll be on a strictly regulated food intake for the next month or so.”

“But... I’m not over weight... Am I?”

“Oh no Captain, you are in fine shape.” Venus reached into a cabinet and showed Troy a bottle of tablets. “You’ll be taking these food pills.”

“Before or after meals?” Troy asked as he took the bottle and peered at the pills inside suspiciously.

“I’m afraid these ARE your meals Captain; all our astronauts take these when out in space.”

“Gee, that kinda hurts more than the electric shock.”

Venus smiled. “Oh you’ll get used to it. I’m afraid it’s very necessary. You see I have to carefully balance the oxygen pill drugs with the ones you

normally take to withstand the very high undersea pressures. The less solid food you consume, the greater your chances of avoiding adverse reactions..."

"Like getting sea sick?"

"Yes... That could be fatal at high pressures."

"Okay Doctor, I guess you know best."

"Yes Captain, I do." Venus smiled again. "You may leave now. Please send in Lieutenant Sheridan."

Troy exited the examination room with some haste. Titan he could cope with; but medical check-ups really bothered him.

"How'd it go Skipper?" Phones asked as Troy met him in the waiting room.

"Oh, fine, just fine." Troy sighed.

"I see you got some pills."

"Pills? No Phones, these are our meals for the next four weeks."

Phones went pale, "No kidding?"

"No kidding Phones — I think I'd have coped better with the green hair!" Troy grinned, "Your turn now. If you're lucky maybe she'll decide you aren't fit enough for the project."

-----

In the control room at Space City, Lieutenant Ninety was anxiously trying to make contact with three unidentified craft which had suddenly appeared in Earth orbit. The base was on full alert, klaxons blaring. "Commander! One of the ships is breaking orbit."

Commander Zero hadn't taken his eyes off the astroscope, "I can see that Ninety! I have got eyes you know! I want all tracking stations to follow it down. We can't risk losing it in the lower atmosphere."

"It's descending too fast Sir," Ninety said excitedly. "The pilot must be crazy! He'll burn up at that speed."

Zero studied the space scanners as the object plummeted Earthwards, "It's heading for the Pacific Ocean Lieutenant. I want to know the exact point of impact."

"Plotted sir. Estimated point of impact... North west Pacific, twelve hundred miles east of China. Position two two one zero black. Impact... one minute."

The unidentified object did not burn up in the atmosphere. It finally slammed into the Pacific Ocean, sending a gigantic cloud of steam and water shooting high up into the sky.

Within an hour, the World Navy had arrived on the scene. Ships and aircraft combed the impact area looking for debris.

Back at Space City, Colonel Steve Zodiac had joined Commander Zero in the Control Tower. "Still no trace of the other two unauthorised craft in Earth orbit Commander?"

"No Steve, not so much as a blip. Ninety has been checking with the tracking stations but they seem to have vanished. Looks like it could have been a false alarm."

"But something splashed down in the Pacific..."

"Yeah... that much is certain."

"Could it have been a large meteor? That would explain why Ninety didn't manage to make radio contact with it."



“That’s the World Navy’s line Steve. They think it’s either a meteor, or a piece of antique space junk that’s fallen out of orbit.” Commander Zero frowned, “Lieutenant Ninety can be a tootie at times, but he is convinced that thing was a spaceship, and frankly, so am I...”

Steve shrugged, “Looking at the data Commander, there’s no hard evidence either way.”

“That’s another thing Steve. There should be more data. Sure, that object came down fast, but we should have been able to get better telemetry”. Zero shook his head, “It looks like it all points to instrument failure...”

“Or,” Steve suggested, “some kind of sabotage.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Zero sighed. “In my experience, meteors don’t sit around in orbit before deciding to drop in. And they don’t make good saboteurs either... There’s something down there in the ocean Steve, and it means trouble. Big trouble.”

-----

For days Troy and Phones had been subjected to numerous medical tests. Their new diet only served to reinforce their growing feeling that volunteering for the project had not been one of their better ideas.

By the end of the week the two friends were in need of a break. 7pm found them in the Blue Lagoon bar. The place was beginning to fill up with off duty aquanauts and other WASP personnel.

Troy and Phones sat at their favourite table near the bar - it had been a long day of tests and more tests.

“Well what did you think of today, Phones?”

“Don’t ask, Skipper — just don’t ask.”

And don't keep reminding me I volunteered for these tests, okay!" snapped Troy.

"I think I hate that pressure tank the most," Phones sighed. "It's so boring sitting around in there with nothing to do."

"I guess you've tried whistling 'Dixie' like you do when you get bored on patrol?"

"Yeah... I tried that. Doctor Venus told me to keep quiet..."

"Good for her."

"At least," Phones said dryly, shaking his little bottle of concentrated food tablets, "we can still have a drink to wash these delicious pills down."

"Nothing stronger than coffee Phones; remember what Doctor Venus said."

"I wonder what's on the menu tomorrow," Phones muttered, "Blue pills? Pink pills? Orange pills?"

"Just look on the bright side," Troy suggested. "If the Commander invites us over for a game of poker, you might keep a clear head, and beat him for a change. Then you can pay me back some of that money you owe me."

"I'll get our coffee Troy..."

The new barman had heard every word of this conversation, but quickly turned away to let someone else serve Phones. Even with his head shaved, and his green skin hidden beneath flesh coloured make-up, X2-Zero had to be careful he was not recognised by the Stingray crew. He decided to clean the tables...

A few minutes later, Phones returned to the table with two coffees. "Cheers Troy... Say where'd my pills go?"

"Uh... Oh I guess they got cleared away when the barman cleared the table..."

As Troy spoke X2-Zero placed the bottle of pills back on the table, "Sorry gentlemen, my mistake."

"Thanks. No harm done," Phones smiled, putting the pills back in his pocket.

Troy watched as X2-Zero disappeared back behind the bar, "You know Phones, there's something familiar about that barman..."

"Really?" Phones grinned, "Do you think he might be the Creature from the Blue Lagoon?"

Troy frowned, "There is something kinda fishy about him..."

"Well Troy, by the time we finish this project, I guess there'll be something kinda fishy about us too!"

They both laughed and forgot about the incident.

X2-Zero was also laughing quietly to himself, as he counted five pills he had extracted from the bottle, "Good, all is going according to plan."

He considered what he should do next. He had to get the pills to Titanica before he was discovered; but what if Titan's scientists could not unlock their secrets? Well, he knew someone who could be forced to help them...

X2-Zero left the bar as soon as he could, complaining of a headache. These Terraineans were such fools! He had driven into a top security base with false ID papers and now all he had to do was ask a security guard to direct him to the medical centre. With any luck Doctor Venus would be working late again and there would be minimum staff on duty at this hour. This would be so easy...

-----

"Not seeing Troy tonight Atlanta?" Commander Shore asked as his daughter came into the lounge of their Marineville apartment.

“No father, not tonight,” she sighed, “Troy said he and Phones had to go out for a quiet drink. All those medical tests are getting him down I guess.”

“Yeah, that Doctor Venus is very keen.”

Atlanta laughed, “Troy doesn’t have a good word to say about her. I’ll make us a coffee.” As she headed for the kitchen a thought struck her, “Father, I wonder if we should invite Doctor Venus over tonight — she must be very lonely here all by herself.”

Shore shook his head, “That’s a nice thought Atlanta, but it seems she’s made some friends already; she told me she was meeting someone at the Blue Lagoon tonight. When I asked who, she said it was a secret.”

“The Blue Lagoon? That’s where Troy was going — you don’t suppose...?”

“No Atlanta, I don’t. Now where’s that coffee?”

-----

Back at the Blue Lagoon, Troy and Phones were on their second coffee. Phones sipped his appreciatively, “Hmm this coffee is sooo good.”

“Knock it off Phones,” Troy scowled, “I’ll sure be glad when that Doctor goes back into space, or wherever it is she goes when she’s not being cruel to aquanauts.”

“But Troy - we did voluntee...”

“Phones!” Troy really didn’t want to be reminded. He was just about to tell Phones to can it when a deep voice interrupted him.

“Hey Troy, Phones - good to see the both of you!”

Troy looked up at the large man standing by their table, “Hello Stygo! Good to see you again!”

Phones smiled. “Yeah. Say, what are you doing here without the rest of the band?”

“And,” Stygo looked pointedly at the two coffees, “what are you guys doing here without a drink? Anyways I am with the band. We thought we’d surprise you HQ types.” Stygo smiled broadly, “and we have a special ‘star’ tonight!”

“You do?” Troy asked, all thoughts of Doctor Venus gone from his mind.

“Yeah! A real good saxophonist!” Stygo headed off towards the stage, “You gotta hear this; she’ll knock you out!”

The lights on the stage went up and there were the Wasps — the World Aquanaut Security Patrol’s very own jazz trio. A guy with dark glasses sat at a piano, to his right was a drummer. Stygo picked up his upright bass and took his position. The three men waved to the cheering audience. The pianist spoke into his microphone. “Good to be back with you folks.” He paused, and turned to wave a hand in the direction of a pretty blonde girl carrying a saxophone who stepped onto the stage and walked over to stand beside him. “Meet our new Evening Star!”

Troy nearly choked on his coffee as the audience applauded the stunning looking beauty in the glittering green evening dress.

“Phones... Isn’t that...?”

“Sure looks like it Troy... that’s Doctor Venus!”

“She looks kinda different out of that lab coat of hers.”

“You can say that again Troy.”

As the applause faded the pianist spoke again. “Okay, here goes with a new little number. We call it, Zero G... a tribute to our World Space Patrol friends, and especially Venus!”

-----

Meanwhile, X2-Zero had succeeded in getting into the hospital block and had donned a white medical coat. “These fools will never suspect me...” he chuckled to himself as he headed towards the rooms where Doctor Venus did her tests.

“Can I help you Doctor?” A security guard had suddenly stepped in front of him.

“Er... No... That’s all right officer... I er, just have to speak with Doctor Venus.”

“I’m afraid she’s left for the night,” the guard informed him.

“Oh... I see... Then I’ll just check over the equipment.”

“Of course Doctor.” The guard opened the door for him and to X2-Zero’s dismay, followed him into the laboratory.

“I just need to check a few things — nothing must go wrong tomorrow.”

“Of course.” The guard sounded interested. “My brother told me all about this stuff. There’s only one other machine like this on Earth...”

“Good.” X2-Zero said. “I mean, I’m glad you understand.”

“Say... Hold it... You’re not a Doctor - you’re the barman from the night club!”

The guard said no more; he fell to the floor unconscious when X2-Zero gave a karate chop to the back of his neck.

-----

Back at the Blue Lagoon, the band was receiving another well-deserved round of applause from an enthusiastic audience.

“She sure can play Troy!” Phones shouted above the din.

“Yeah... Guess she’s not all bad.” Troy agreed, “Say, they’re taking a break. Let’s see if she’ll join us.”

-----

“I needed a good walk Marina, thanks for coming along.”

Atlanta and Marina had decided to take a little evening stroll together.

Marina nodded. Both girls were a little preoccupied.

“Why,” Atlanta asked, “do you suppose Troy decided to volunteer to help Doctor Venus? He’s spending far too much time over at the hospital these days.”

Marina shook her head and shrugged.

“Oh look Marina, we seem to have walked all the way over to the Blue Lagoon — maybe we should just pop in and give Troy and Phones a wave?”

Marina nodded her agreement and the two girls quickened their pace. A sudden loud, low rumble halted the girls in their tracks.

“Hey, was that thunder?” Atlanta asked, glancing up at the sky.

Marina shook her head and pointed back the way they had walked.

Sirens began screaming loudly.

“Fire trucks!” shouted Atlanta as the vehicles hurtled past them, their flashing lights blazing against the dark night sky. She stared after them.

“Marina... It’s the hospital — look it’s on fire!”

Over on the other side of Marineville they could see smoke and flames billowing from the hospital building.

Marina tugged at Atlanta’s arm. Troy and Doctor Venus were rushing out of the Blue Lagoon and into the car park. Venus was hurriedly pulling a coat around her bare shoulders.

“Troy!” Atlanta called, but Troy didn’t hear above all the noise and he and Venus quickly sped off in his car.

-----

A few hours later Troy and Phones were in the Control Tower reporting to Commander Shore.

“Well I guess there’s no serious damage...” Shore was saying, “... no casualties — thank goodness.”

“No serious damage Commander?” exclaimed Venus as she emerged from the elevator. “My equipment — it’s all totally destroyed!”

Venus looked exhausted, her blonde hair grubby with soot and ash. She self-consciously brushed at her coat as she joined the three men. “It may take months to get replacement equipment...”

“Yeah.” Shore added, “I was just getting to that Doctor. The lab for the breathing experiments — that’s out of commission.”

“I’ll say it is,” said Venus. “Don’t you have security here in Marineville?”

“You mean you think it was deliberate?” Troy asked in surprise.

Shore sighed, “Yeah Troy, it was sabotage all right.” He moved his hover chair over to a desk and picked up a slim folder. “It’s all in the security report. One of the guards found someone posing as a doctor... he recognised him as a new barman at the Blue Lagoon night club.”

“I knew it!” Troy exclaimed, “er sir.”

“You did?” Shore demanded.

“Well, no sir, not exactly, but I thought he looked odd.”

“He looked odd?” Commander Shore sounded weary, “Anyway, the impostor slugged the guard. He had time to plant coralamic bombs on the lab equipment before another guard tried to apprehend him.”

“Tried sir?” Troy asked. “He got away?”



“Yeah Troy, The guard only just had time to get the unconscious guy out before the bombs detonated. Unfortunately the saboteur got clean away in all the confusion.” Shore tossed the report back on to the desk. “The rest you know.”

Troy frowned. “Commander, you say that guy used coralamics? That sounds like Titan’s work.”

“More than likely Troy.” Commander Shore agreed.

“I said that barman looked fishy!” Troy muttered.

“That’s right Commander,” Phones added supportively, “Troy thought that he might be the Creature from the Blue Lagoon....”

“Highly amusing!” Shore snorted, “I’ll be sure to mention that to the World President, when I inform him that his pet project has just been wrecked.”

“Please don’t worry Commander Shore,” Doctor Venus reassured him, “I’ll requisition new equipment from Space City. It’s just a matter of a few months — only a short delay — not the end of the whole project.”

-----

A little while later Troy and Phones were heading back to their apartments.

“Troy!” Atlanta called after them. They waited for her to catch up.

“Hello Honey,” Troy greeted her, “...Guess it’s been a hectic evening.”

“Yes.” Atlanta agreed. “Looks like your date with Venus got spoiled...”

“Date?” Troy mumbled, “Venus?”

“Say Troy, Atlanta...” Phones said quickly, “I’ll see you both tomorrow...I’m real bushed. Good night.”

Without waiting for a reply Phones hurried on his way.

“I’m not stupid Troy,” Atlanta continued. “Just having a quiet drink with Phones, you said. Well Marina and I saw you — with Doctor Venus at the Blue Lagoon night club!”

“But Atlanta... Honey... I can explain...”



### **Chapter 3**

## **Depths Of Despair**

Surface Agent X2-Zero sat brooding in his gloomy old house on the Isle of Lemoy.

Doctor Venus had eluded him. If only things had gone according to plan, he would by now have wrung every last detail of the Terraineans experiments from the wretched girl, and then he would have delivered his captive to Titan - and been richly rewarded... Still, at least he had the pills. Titan would surely be pleased with him - or so he hoped...

The surface agent's hopes faded rapidly as he reported to Titan over the video link. As he detailed his actions, the undersea ruler's displeasure was becoming increasingly obvious.

"And that," Titan demanded, "is all you have to report?"

"But mighty Titan," X2-Zero grovelled, "I have samples of their new experimental drugs, and the Terraineans will take months to rebuild their equipment."

Titan stared down balefully from the video screen. X2-Zero could see that his master was not about to heap praise upon him.

"Imbecile!" the undersea ruler shouted. Then lowering his voice, Titan spoke slowly and carefully, as if talking to someone of limited intelligence, "X2-Zero, did it not occur to you to kidnap the Terrainean female, Doctor Venus, and bring her here to Titanica?"

X2-Zero decided to remain silent. He dared not admit he'd failed the attempt.

Titan leaned back on his coral throne, as he continued, “The Terrainean female will be brought here to Titanica and forced to tell us all about these drugs that you have acquired - and she will no longer be able to use them against us.”

“Yes Mighty Titan,” the surface agent hastily agreed. “You are most wise. I will see to it at once!”

“No!” Titan raised a hand, “You will proceed to Titanica at once - with the drugs. I cannot risk their loss. I will despatch a Mechanical Fish to Space City to capture Doctor Venus.”

“But... Mighty Titan, Doctor Venus is still at Marineville.”

“Do as I say,” commanded Titan. “There is but one other machine the Terraineans can employ for their purpose - and Doctor Venus will no doubt hurry to acquire it.”

“And the machine is at Space City?”

“So more capable surface agents than you have informed me, X2-Zero. Now, bring those drugs to me - at once!”

-----

Commander Shore watched from the Control Tower windows as a sleek blue WASP passenger jet soared into the sky — bound for Space City. “Okay Atlanta, re-schedule Stingray’s patrol to start tomorrow.”

Atlanta looked up from her console, “But father, I thought Troy would have some free time, now that Doctor Venus has gone.”

“Free time?” Commander Shore shook his head, “If I know Captain Tempest, he’ll want to be back at the controls of Stingray.”

“I... I hoped I could... That is I hoped that Troy and I could spend some time together. Stingray’s patrol isn’t scheduled until next week...”

“Lieutenant Shore, are you suggesting that I run WASP operations to fit in with your social calendar?” Commander Shore turned and gazed out of the window, “Besides, last I heard, you wanted me to have Tempest busted down to lieutenant, and packed off to the Antarctic Ocean.”

“I said that about Troy?”

“Yeah Atlanta. You did.” The Commander swung his hover chair around to face his daughter, “So... What’s the score now?”

“I... That is... Troy explained everything. I was just being silly.”

Commander Shore sighed, “Okay... I get the picture. Keep the patrol schedule the way it was.”

“Oh thank you father — you’re boss!”

“Boss?”

Atlanta kissed her father on the cheek, “Just an expression father — and it suits you.”

-----

About six hours later, a weary Doctor Venus walked into Professor Matthew Matic’s workshop at Space City.

“Why Venus!” the Professor exclaimed, looking up from his workbench. “I didn’t expect you back at Space City for weeks.”

Venus smiled, “Hello Matt. Yes, that was the plan. We had a little setback — sabotage!”

“Sabotage?!”

“Yes Matt, it was terrible. There was an explosion in the hospital, all my equipment was destroyed. Thankfully, no-one was hurt.”

“Venus!” Colonel Steve Zodiac called as he entered the workshop. “Jock said he’d seen you heading this way. How come you’re back so soon?”

“Hello Steve,” Venus grinned, giving him a hug. “There was a change of plan. I’m sorry. Were you enjoying not having me around?”

Steve laughed, “Well it has been kinda quiet without you, but say, what’s happening with your project at Marineville?”

“It’s on hold. I’ll tell you about it later. I’ve just been all through it with Commander Zero, and I’m rather tired”.

Venus sat down on a corner of Matt’s workbench, “You start a new patrol tomorrow Steve... Would it be okay if I come along too?”

Steve was delighted, “Of course! Welcome home, as Zoonie would say.”

“And...” Venus asked, a hopeful look on her face, “Can Zoonie come along too?”

“You’ve got a deal Doctor. It’ll be boss to have you both on Fireball again. I thought I was just going to have Matt for company this trip.”

Matt looked at Venus and shrugged, “Yeah, I guess he still doesn’t like the way I make coffee...”

Venus laughed, “I can’t tell you both how good it is to be back.”

“Like a lift home Venus?” Steve offered, seeing how exhausted the Doctor looked.

“Oh yes please Steve. Lieutenant Ninety took Zoonie home a few hours ago. Poor Zoonie, I’ll be so glad to see him.”

Venus didn’t talk much during the drive to her home on Atello Beach, a few miles outside Space City. In fact she fell asleep, with her head resting against Steve’s shoulder.

“You’re home Venus,” Steve said softly, as he brought his hover car to a gentle landing beside Venus’s front door.

“Already?” Venus asked sleepily.

Steve helped her out of the car, and they were greeted by an excited Zoonie chanting ‘Welcome home!’ as they entered the house.

Venus hugged her pet lazoon, “Hello Zoonie. I’ve missed you. I hope you’ve been a good boy.”

“Stop that Zoonie... Stop that Zoonie...” the lazoon recited happily.

Steve laughed. “I guess Zoonie must’ve learned some new phrases from Mrs Zero.”

“Oh, it’s so good to be home.” Venus gazed out of her beach house window at the blue ocean, “Marineville they call it — but it’s miles from the sea.”

“Well,” Steve chuckled, “I guess Space City is more than a few miles from space! Speaking of space, you’d better get some sleep — back to Sector 25 tomorrow afternoon.”

“Steve!” Venus suddenly cried out, “A fish... a big fish!”

Steve hurried over to her side, “What’s the matter Venus? It was probably a dolphin...”

“No Steve. It was huge! And it had great big staring eyes!”

“Hey... calm down.” Steve put a hand on her shoulder, “I don’t see anything out there now... Maybe you’ve been working too hard...”

“But Steve...” Venus became calmer, “You’re right, perhaps I have been overdoing things...”

“You just need to get some rest. Say, I’ll tell Matt, and he can get over here early tomorrow with his fishing rod!”

-----

Venus waved to Steve as he drove away in his hover car. “Well, Zoonie, I guess it’s time for bed.”

Zoonie was agitated as they both went back into the house. The lazoon kept peering out of the window, and then covering his eyes and whimpering.

“There, there, Zoonie,” comforted Venus, “whatever is the matter?” Venus gazed out across the bay, “Did you see something out there too?”

-----

Within an hour, the sun had dipped below the horizon, and a pale crescent moon now hung in the clear Pacific night sky. Try as she might Venus had not been able to calm Zoonie. Woken up for the second time, she climbed out of bed and went back into the lounge. Zoonie was not in his basket, he was staring out of the window again, nervously calling, “Howdy folks... Howdy folks...”

Venus was on the verge of calling Steve when a green reptilian hand suddenly smashed through the front door of her beach house. Zoonie screeched in terror, as an Aquaphibian forced its way through the shattered door, and lumbered into the lounge.

Venus turned and ran back into her bedroom, desperate to reach her ray gun. Steve had insisted she kept one, but she never thought she would have to use it.

There was a crash as a second Aquaphibian entered the beach house. It aimed its rifle at the frantic lazoon.

Venus wrenched open a dressing table drawer, the contents scattering on the carpet as it fell. She stooped to grab the fallen pistol, and quickly fired at the nearest Aquaphibian, which was almost upon her. The creature shrugged off the blast, and continued towards her. She increased the force setting on her gun and fired again. The Aquaphibian staggered backwards.



The second Aquaphibian turned away from Zoonie to aid its companion. It raised its gun and blasted a hole in the bedroom wall behind the space doctor.

“Drop your weapon, Terrainean,” it demanded in a strange gurgling voice, “or die!”

With a screech of rage Zoonie hurled himself onto the back of the Aquaphibian, but it whirled around, flinging the lazoon across the room.

“Zoonie!” Venus shouted as she looked to where her pet had fallen. The butt of a rifle slammed into her right hand and her ray gun fell from her paralysed fingers. “Run Zoonie,” Venus shouted as she was knocked to the ground, “Run!”

-----

The following morning Commander Zero briefed Steve Zodiac on Doctor Venus’s project, “Things are getting critical Steve. The World President is anxious to give people more living space, and we just can’t find more worlds we can colonise.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s really only New Earth. But Commander, once they’ve got the gravity densification completed, and the atmosphere adjusted to Earth like conditions...”

“Yes, you’re right Steve, there’s plenty of room on New Earth for a massive emigration program if need be. It’s all down to politics. New Earth is yesterday’s news. The President wants to pull another rabbit out of the hat. So... if we can’t give him new worlds, he wants to more fully exploit the Earth.”

“And that’s why Venus’s project is so important. I gather there’s some kind of problem?”

"I'll say there is. Someone sabotaged the equipment Venus was using at Marineville. It was destroyed by a bomb. Their security boys say it was probably coralamics. Luckily no one was hurt."

"Coralamics? That's the stuff some of those undersea races use..."

"Yeah, Commander Shore thinks it might be the work of Titan."

Titan... Sabotage... Steve was starting to worry about a 'big fish'...

"What's wrong Steve?" the Commander asked, seeing that the Colonel's expression had suddenly changed.

"Oh... Probably nothing... Commander, I'd like to just give Venus a call."

"Sure, go ahead Steve. In fact, it might be an idea to get her over here. Tell her we'll send a jetmo-cab."

Steve picked up the phone, and quickly dialed the number. He waited. He felt a cold chill start to spread up his spine. No answer... After what seemed an eternity to Steve, someone did answer, but it wasn't Venus... "Howdy folks! Howdy folks!"

"Zoonie!" Steve exclaimed, forgetting his worries, "You sure are learning new tricks. Where's Venus?"

Zoonie started whining and muttering, "Welcome... home... howdy..." He seemed to be desperately trying to say something.

Steve could tell the lazoon was very frightened, "Zoonie, what's wrong?"

Zoonie started saying two words, over and over, "Run Zoonie! Run Zoonie!"

Steve slammed down the phone and hurried to the door, "Commander, have a security team meet me at Atello Beach! I think something's happened to Venus!"

-----

Steve Zodiac leapt from his hover car and ran to the beach house — ray gun in hand. “Venus!” he shouted, half hoping his fears were unfounded. Then he saw the shattered front door. Cautiously he edged his way inside the house, listening intently. “Venus!” he called again. A sudden noise made him swing round, and he saw Zoonie crouched in his basket whimpering.

Then Steve saw the blast hole cut into the bedroom wall. He hurried over to the open door. The bedroom was empty, and there, on the floor, lay Venus’s stun-gun.

Outside, half a dozen security guards were surrounding the house, Lieutenant Ninety in command. “Sir!” one of the men called, “Footprints... here... Leading down to the sea!”

Venus slowly opened her eyes, but for a moment could not focus on her surroundings. She felt unsteady on her feet, as if recovering from the effects of a coma ray. Cold, clammy hands held her firmly. Her mind wandered. Where was she? She remembered green reptilian hands smashing their way into her beach house...

Gradually her vision cleared. The sight of Titan sitting high above her on his coral throne brought memory flooding back to her with chilling clarity. Where had the creatures taken her? Was Zoonie safe?

“I do hope my subjects have not harmed you, Terrainean.”

“Who are you?” Venus gasped.

“I am Titan, Lord of the undersea city of Titanica. And you, Doctor Venus,” declared the tyrant menacingly, “are now my prisoner. You will tell me about the drug you have developed at Marineville and the purpose of your accursed experiments there.”

“Drug?” Venus asked, “What drug?”

“Do not attempt to deceive me Terrainean! I will ask you once more Doctor. Tell me about your research at Marineville... Or suffer the consequences.”

Venus struggled uselessly against the vice-like grip of the Aquaphibian who held her, “I’m just performing endurance tests to improve aquanaut stamina. Release me!”

“She is lying your majesty,” Surface Agent X2-Zero observed impassively.

“Obviously,” Titan replied, not taking his eyes from his beautiful captive. “Very well, I shall find the truth by other means.”

X2-Zero grinned evilly, “Let me persuade her, Majesty.”

“No...” Titan turned to face X2-Zero, “I have more subtle ways of extracting information.” He paused for a moment, turning back to regard the helpless, struggling girl thoughtfully, “X2-Zero, you have done well, and will be rewarded. When I have the information I require, the Terrainean will be taken to Aquatraz. You will train her as my palace slave. She will perform Marina’s... duties.”

“No!” Commander Zero snapped.

“But Commander...” Steve protested.

“Colonel Zodiac, I cannot permit you to take Fireball Junior, or any other craft, on a rescue mission to look for Doctor Venus.” Zero looked anxious, but determined, “This is a job for the WASP. Meanwhile, you are due to launch Fireball XL5 this afternoon, to patrol Sector Two Five.”

“Yes sir.”

“Look Steve, I know how you feel — believe me. But we have a job to do — in space.” Zero tried to sound encouraging, though he didn’t feel too good

about the situation, “The WASP have all the expertise in undersea operations. If anyone can get Venus back, they can.”

“Steve, the Commander’s right,” Matt added, dismally. “Why, Junior couldn’t stand the pressure at the depths where Venus is likely to have been taken... But the WASP have Stingray.”

Steve nodded, “Yeah Matt... Stingray. I sure hope they act fast!”

-----

Within half an hour Commander Shore had briefed the Stingray crew on the kidnapping.

Troy started towards the elevator, Phones and Marina following him, “We’ll get Stingray seaborne immediately sir.”

Shore raised a hand, “Hold your horses, Tempest.”

“Sir?”

“It’s a big ocean Captain. Doctor Venus could be anywhere. We’ll initiate routine procedure, air search, and alert all shipping and submarines.”

“But Commander...” Phones protested, “...We know where Doctor Venus is. She’ll be in Titanica.”

“And we have to get her out of there sir.” Troy added in desperation.

“Captain Tempest, I cannot let you take Stingray to Titanica. If you are right, and Doctor Venus is held captive there, then Titan is sure to be ready and waiting for you.”

Atlanta was shocked, “But father, we have to rescue her.”

Commander Shore swung his hover chair around to face his daughter, “Listen Atlanta, I want to rescue Doctor Venus as much as anyone else, but if she is in Titanica we’ll need a plan to get her out.”

“A plan?!” Atlanta was beginning to sound angry, “Who knows what Titan is doing to the poor girl?”

Commander Shore was adamant, “Lieutenant, organise that air/sea search operation. That’s an order!”

In the heat of the discussion, no one noticed that Marina had quietly slipped out of the Control Room...

-----

Marina quickly made her way to one of the vehicle parking areas. Atlanta had taught her to drive months ago and she’d been allocated her own car. She drove up to the main gate and flashed her WASP pass.

“Off to the beach?” The guard smiled, “Wish I was. Have a good time.”

Marina smiled and nodded as the guard waved her on.

As she drove towards the coast Marina told herself she had no choice. No sense in trying to get permission. She knew Commander Shore would never have allowed her to attempt what she was now planning to do. She was soon parking her car on a quiet secluded beach. She’d been here many times. The sea air was welcoming and strengthened her resolve. A gentle breeze blew through her long hair as she ran down the warm sandy beach to the water’s edge. Without a moment’s hesitation she plunged fully clothed into the sea and disappeared beneath the waves.

Soon Marina was swimming faster than she had ever done before, heading away from the Californian coastline. It did not take long for her to reach her destination. Before her on the seabed lay a small submarine, partially hidden by rocks and sand. It was a compact, shell-like craft. Her father Aphony, had ordered it to be left in readiness for her in case she ever wished to return home swiftly. But she did not intend travelling to Pacifica.

The sub was soon speeding towards Titanica with Marina at the controls. She found herself wondering if she would ever see Troy or her father again,

but she had to try to rescue Doctor Venus from Titan. She knew that Titan would never imagine a mere girl could invade his impenetrable city. However, Marina had committed many of the secret entry codes and passageways of Titanica to memory, during the year she had spent as Titan's slave. She shuddered as she thought of how Venus would suffer if she could not free her from Titan's clutches...



## **Chapter 4**

### **Under Pressure**

Commander Shore had made his decision. He had sent Stingray to investigate the 'Giant Meteor' that had apparently fallen into the Pacific the previous week. He'd had a dozen scientists clamouring for Stingray to help them find their lost rock. Up until now he'd thought it was a waste of time. But the impact area was fairly close to Titanica...

Atlanta answered the incoming radio call, "Tower to Stingray. Go ahead Troy."

"We are on course for the search area," Troy reported, "Rate Six. Estimated time of arrival about six hours."

"Okay Troy. So far the World Navy has found no trace of wreckage, but that's deep water out there."

"You can say that again Atlanta. I guess the navy still doesn't have any submarines to equal Stingray. If there's anything down there it's up to us to find it. Has Marina shown up?"

"Not yet Troy, but she is off duty. She's probably just gone swimming."

"Yeah... That's what worries me. If she does show up..."

"I'll tell you if we hear anything Troy. Your next check in is in three hours."

"Okay Atlanta. P.W.O.R."

Phones glanced over at Troy, "What do you think's out there Skipper?"

Troy sighed, "Maybe a few bits of wreckage. Maybe some bits of rock... The important thing is we'll be pretty close to Titanica."



“Yeah. I guess this is our lucky break Troy.”

Troy nodded, “We’ll be maintaining radio silence when we start heading down into the Marianas Trench... We use our initiative to search - and we won’t waste too much time looking for space debris.”

“I sure hope we can get Doctor Venus out of there Skipper.”

“It’s going to be tough Phones, that’s for sure. You’d better get some sleep, I’ll wake you in four hours.”

-----

Titan watched as two of his Aquaphibians half carried, half dragged a struggling Doctor Venus back into his audience chamber. She was secured to a pillar with heavy chains.

Titan spoke to his guards, “I will interrogate this Terrainean female. Go! See that no-one disturbs me.”

Venus tugged uselessly at the chains that bound her wrists as Titan walked towards her. She wore only her now dirty and torn nightdress. Her hair fell untidily about her tear-stained face. Venus felt wretched, but she was still unbowed and defiant, “I won’t tell you a thing!” she spat, her voice betraying her now weakened condition.

Titan made no reply. He stepped forward and roughly grasped her chin with one hand, forcing her to turn her head. She saw a large round window, and beyond it, a large ugly fish was staring fixedly at her. She tried to turn away, but Titan held her firmly.

“You will remain still Terrainean, while mighty Teufel, the sea god, looks upon you.”

The ugly fish’s mouth suddenly gaped open, and the terrified doctor was blinded by a dazzling beam of light, which struck her full in the face. She

tried in vain to close her eyes against the glare, which seemed to be burning deep into her mind.

Titan relaxed his hold on her, but Venus did not move a muscle. She stood transfixed by the probing light.

As Titan watched, Venus began to speak slowly, in a toneless voice, "Oxygen pills... breathing underwater... WASP... Troy Tempest..."

Titan listened intently, as Venus continued to talk as if she were in a dream.

After half an hour had passed, Teufel's light beam faded, and the fish moved away, still watching from a distance. Venus slumped in her chains, unconscious.

-----

Many miles from the city of Titanica, the WASP submarine, Stingray arrived at the impact zone.

"Stingray to Tower." Troy called over the sub's radio. "We have arrived at search area."

"Tower to Stingray." Commander Shore responded from Marineville. "Proceed with search Troy. The World Navy can't find anything. There has to be something left down there, and heaven only knows what it might be. Radio silence now Troy. Good hunting."

"Thanks Commander. PWOR." Troy flicked off the radio. "Gee Phones, I wish we knew what's happened to Marina."

"Yeah Troy, I guess the Commander would have said if she'd shown up back at Marineville."

"It's my guess that she's gone to Titanica... Okay Phones, activate pressure compensators. Let's take her down. Keep your eyes and ears open. We are already too close to Titan's territory for my liking."

-----

When Venus awoke, she found that she was lying on the floor, trussed up tightly with ropes. She winced as she felt just how tight her bonds were. Looking about her she soon realised that she was aboard a small submarine. She struggled to get into a sitting position. The two Aquaphibians standing at the sub's console, briefly looked back at her, but then quickly returned their attention to controlling their vessel, gurgling to each other in their strange alien voices. They were obviously confident that their prisoner was very well tied up.

A slight movement caught Venus's attention. She turned her head. Behind her she could see several large crates... The lid of one of them was slowly sliding aside... Venus cast an anxious look back at the crew. They were still staring ahead. Suddenly the top of the crate fell to the floor with a loud thud. Instinctively Venus rolled into a corner. The two Aquaphibians whirled around, weapons ready, but immediately fell to the deck, as a burst of gunfire split the air.

-----

Stingray's searchlights cut through the darkness as the submarine began a spiral dive down into the Marianas Trench.

Phones suddenly clutched at his headphones, "Skipper! I'm getting a positive SONAR sounding... near the sea bed..."

"Can you get a fix on it Phones?"

"Sure thing Troy, it's clear as a bell. One hundred and two green. Depth thirty five thousand."

"Six and a half miles down... Wreckage?" Troy wondered, as he nosed the sub down, her searchlights penetrating the gloomy depths.

“No Skipper... It’s moving! But very slowly.” Phones concentrated for a moment, making a few adjustments to his hydrophone equipment. “Say, it’s pretty big, well over six hundred feet long, and I hear engines!”

“That could be a Navy sub Phones... The Atlantis was in the search group... but she couldn’t survive the pressure down that deep.”

Phones looked worried, “Those submarine aircraft carriers are pretty good tubs — but hell, if it’s down there, it’s sure in big trouble!”

“Flood all tanks! Dive Phones! Rate Six!”

At six hundred knots, Stingray rapidly closed on the unseen craft. The pinging in Phones’ headset grew more rapid. “She’s speeding up Troy... Leaving the seabed!”

“There!” Troy exclaimed. “I see it! What in the name of?!”

As the craft became more visible, Troy and Phones were certain that it was not a Navy sub...

“There’s another craft Troy... That thing’s pursuing it... sounds like a Terror Fish.”

Sure enough, there in the glow of Stingray’s lights they could soon see the tiny shape of a Terror Fish, frantically weaving and dodging, as a huge shape bore down upon it.

“Whatever that thing is Phones... We’re going to give it a wide berth. One eighty green!”

Stingray swung around in a tight arc, and headed back the way it had come, engines straining.

“Stingray to Tower...” Troy called over the radio, “Taking evasive action... There’s something down here... huge... Over six hundred feet long...”

Atlanta's voice replied, faint, barely audible, "Tower to Stingray, please repeat... Your signal is weak... Troy..." the radio crackled briefly, and then went silent.

"Something's jamming the radio..." Troy muttered, trying to get more speed out of Stingray, as she headed upwards.

"We're in trouble Troy! That thing's after us now... and there's no sign of the Terror Fish."

Sure enough, the huge ungainly intruder was swinging around to face Stingray, its speed increasing all the time.

"It's gaining on us Troy... and it's nearly at rate seven..."

"Okay Phones... we can't outrun it," Troy said grimly, Prepare sting missiles one and two. Let's see if they're as tough as they look!"

A moment later Stingray turned one hundred and eighty degrees, and two sting missiles sped towards the huge pursuing craft. As Stingray slowed, Troy and Phones watched in horror as the missiles exploded hundreds of feet short of their target.

"What now Skipper?" Phones asked tonelessly, as the enemy craft bore down upon them, blocking out the view.

"Pray Phones... just pray."

Soon there was only one craft prowling the seabed, a big ugly one. It continued to gain speed as it headed upwards, its appetite well and truly satisfied.

-----

The atmosphere in the Marineville Control Tower was tense. It was over twenty minutes since they had last heard from Stingray.

Atlanta almost jumped when a call came in over the radio. “Father, I’ve got Space City calling you — it’s Wilbur.”

“Okay, Atlanta. Put him on.” Commander Shore said as he steered his hover chair over towards the wall screen.

The stylised videophone logo was replaced by an image of the World Space Patrol Chief, “Sam, any news about Doctor Venus?”

“We’ve got trouble Wilbur. We just lost contact with Stingray... She’d just found your mystery spaceship down in the Marianas Trench.”

“Commander,” Lieutenant John Fisher called from over at the subsea communications console, “the World Navy submarine Atlantis has reported sighting something huge moving towards the surface.”

“It must be the craft Troy sighted before... before...” sobbed Atlanta.

Shore abruptly ended the video link with Zero and turned to his daughter. “Now Atlanta, we are not writing Stingray off yet. Fisher, call up the Atlantis. I want to speak directly to Captain Jordan.”

Commander Shore wished there were some other vessel within striking range of the alien craft. He had no doubts about the sub’s capabilities. Atlantis was a state-of-the-art submarine aircraft carrier. It could deploy 200 jet fighters and was packed with high tech weaponry of its own. No problems there. The problem was Jordan. Shore regarded the Navy man as a coward, based on his previous dealings with him.

A few moments later the French skipper of the Atlantis responded, “Commander Shore. We are in pursuit of the alien craft, and are standing by to engage. It will not escape us.”

“Listen Captain Jordan, we just lost contact with Stingray. She was investigating that alien space-ship.”

“Most regrettable Commander. I will search the area, when we have dealt with the alien vessel. Atlantis will make short work of this. ‘Ow does that saying go? The bigger they are the harder thezzzzz ...”

“Sir,” Fisher reported, “We’ve lost all contact with Atlantis...”

-----

The hot early afternoon sun beat down upon the South Pacific island base of the World Space Patrol. Resting on the launch rail beside the revolving Control Tower a gleaming silver-hulled spaceship was preparing to blast off for Sector 25 - without Venus.

Colonel Steve Zodiac sat morosely at the controls of Fireball XL5, as the last minutes were counting down. He couldn’t just fly off on patrol while the woman he... yes damn it, the woman he loved was held captive by Titan. Mutinous thoughts were running through his mind when suddenly the red alert klaxons blared.

“Steve,” Commander Zero called over the radio, “we’ve got trouble.”

“Trouble, Commander?”

“Big trouble, Steve! Stingray found that missing spaceship... and it’s hostile. The Atlantis is engaging it now.”

“What happened to Stingray?”

“We don’t know, Steve. Shore says they’ve lost contact...”

“There must be two more of those craft still in orbit — some sort of invisibility shield?”

“Get XL5 launched...” ordered Commander Zero, “if any more alien ships are up there I want them destroyed, invisible or not!”

Seconds later, Zero watched from the tower windows as Fireball XL5 blasted down the mile long launch rails and soared into the clear blue sky.

-----

Meanwhile the World Navy submarine Atlantis was getting into hot water. Captain Jordan's Exec had bad news, "All radio contact lost sir... some sort of electronic jamming."

"It will not 'elp them now mon ami," Jordan answered grimly. "Our aircraft already have the enemy's position. The first air to sea missiles will strike anytime now."

Sweeping low over the Pacific Ocean, the carrier's planes were already launching their missiles. They plunged into the sea and streaked down into the inky depths.

The alien space submarine was still heading upwards as the first missiles struck home. The sub shuddered, but maintained its course and speed.

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"Troy... what's happening?" Phones called out groggily as Stingray shuddered to numerous impacts.

"That sub..." Troy groaned, "It must've swallowed us whole..."

Troy was rubbing his head trying to wake himself up. He couldn't see much in the dim light, but they seemed to be inside some kind of chamber.

Phones started checking the instruments on the control console. "Maybe Commander Shore is bombarding the area with hydromic missiles Skipper... Say we don't seem to have any power, everything is dead."

Troy winced as another explosion rocked Stingray, "And that's going to include us too at this rate..."

-----

"Another 'it!" exclaimed Jordan triumphantly, as he watched his forward viewing screen on the Atlantis. A further blast enveloped the alien vessel



and it began to slow. Then a dark, ominous black liquid fog began to pour out of it, a cloud that quickly spread.

“What?!” Jordan gasped as the view screen clouded over. “Full astern!”

The Atlantis shuddered slightly as the powerful engines slowed. The bridge suddenly became filled with the shouts of officers and crew calling out in disbelief.

“We’ve lost power!”

“Engines not responding!”

“All internal communications failed!”

Then the lights went out.

-----

Fireball XL5 sat in geostationary orbit, near the location where the alien ships had first appeared; but there was no sign of any space craft there now. Where were the two hidden alien ships? If they were shielded in some way they could attack without warning.

“Prime interceptors, Robert” ordered Steve, not wishing to take any chances.

“Prime interceptors. Prime interceptors,” repeated XL5’s robot co-pilot in his monotone electronic voice as he carried out Steve’s instructions.

Steve couldn’t get Venus out of his mind. Why had she started these crazy underwater breathing tests at Marineville? Why hadn’t the WASP captured Titan and imprisoned him years ago? They could have locked him up with the Subterrain Chief and thrown away the key.

In the patrol ship’s navigation bay Professor Matic studied the astroscope from his circular desk looking for any sign of the aliens. He was also worried about Venus. The thought of anything happening to her... Suddenly he found

what he was looking for on the astroscope. “Steve! Steve!” called Matt excitedly into the intercom. “Two ships just appeared on the ‘scope out of nowhere. According to these readings they must be over 600 feet long. They’re picking up speed and heading out of the Solar System.”

“Give me a course code to follow them Matt,” ordered Steve. “If these aliens are responsible for the loss of Stingray I want to find out who we are dealing with before we blow them out of the space sky.”

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Lieutenant Ninety had just come back on duty in the Space City control room. “Sir!” he exclaimed, as he adjusted the space scanners.

“What is it man?” Commander Zero snapped impatiently.

“Unidentified craft heading for space... Pacific area, reference...”

“Never mind that... Alert the orbital missile batteries. Intercept it, fast!”

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The huge alien space submarine hurtled up through the atmosphere trailing clouds of thick black smoke. A flight of navy fighters kept a respectful distance.

“Stay clear — that stuff will knock out all electronics. Launch your missiles... now!” ordered the lead pilot.

They knew it was hopeless, but they had to try something. Seven jet-fighters released two dozen air to air missiles and then peeled off, heading away from the point of impact. There was no impact... All missiles exploded uselessly half a mile from their rapidly receding target.

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“Orbital station E5 to Space City... Cannot locate target... Request more data...”

“It’s no good sir...” Ninety stared at the space scanner. “Nothing... we’ve lost it.”

“Alert Fireball XL5,” ordered Commander Zero.

The telephone began to ring, “Zero here... Mister President! I... that is...You see...”



## **Chapter 5**

### **Powerless!**

Fireball XL5 continued to plunge headlong into the dark void of outer space, her nutomic hyperdrive motors delivering maximum thrust. Far ahead, the two vast alien spaceships were apparently oblivious to the pursuit.

“Maintain full power Robert,” Steve ordered. He was keeping an anxious eye on the instrument panel, where a number of gauges gave readings that were moving slowly, but surely into the danger zone.

“Steve,” Matt called over the intercom, “the motors are overheating!”

“Tell me something I don’t know Matt.”

“Space City to XL5,” Lieutenant Ninety called over the radio, “Space City calling XL5. Come in Colonel Zodiac.”

“We’re still pursuing the alien ships Lieutenant. Will report as soon as...”

“Listen Steve,” cut in Commander Zero, “the unidentified craft has just left Earth and disappeared off the space scanners. Likely it’s heading your way. Don’t take any chances. Contact with World Navy Submarine Atlantis was lost just after she commenced her attack run.”

“Okay Commander, we’ll be on our toes.”

In the navigation bay Matt had heard the radio call. He quickly began adjusting the astroscope, aligning it back towards Earth.

“You get that Matt?” Steve called over the intercom.

“Sure did Steve. Don’t worry, I’ll be watching our backs.”

“Thanks Matt.”

Steve's eyes never left the main monitor, and the bright dots that indicated his quarry. But his mind wandered to thoughts of Doctor Venus, and he cursed the fact that he was not doing a thing to help her.

-----

In the dark and silent control room of the Terror Fish submarine, Marina was examining the sub's control systems. There was no power. The distant explosions which had shaken the fish-like craft had ceased. Now all was silent. All had gone so well. She'd entered Titanica unseen and overheard Titan's plans for the Space Doctor. She'd hidden aboard the Terror Fish that was going to take Venus to Aquatraz, found an atomic rifle and waited for the right moment to strike. She'd taken control, they were on their way to freedom... And then... Marina slammed her fist down on the useless control console.

Doctor Venus put a hand on the girl's shoulder, "Thank you Marina. Thank you for all you've done. We'll get out of this mess; I know we will."

Marina nodded and smiled briefly in the darkness.

"We must have been swallowed up by that huge submarine," Venus continued, her voice sending strange echoes around the cabin. "I expect we're being taken back to Titanica..."

Marina shook her head. She was sure that Titan had no vessels of this immense size and power. She felt that they had to leave the Terror Fish, but they were still submerged and Venus had no underwater breathing gear. The air would soon run out without any power. Outside, Marina knew there was plenty of oxygen rich seawater that would enable her to breathe. But was there any air? They would have to wait and see if their captors made a move.

Marina picked up a fallen atomic rifle and handed it to Venus. Venus took the weapon with more than a little revulsion. The two Aquaphibian bodies

that lay on the deck were graphic reminders of how lethal these weapons were. She felt terribly inadequate, standing there in the darkness, wearing only her tattered nightdress and clutching the strange alien weapon.

Suddenly Marina heard something outside. She turned her head, listening. Both girls felt the submarine lurch and begin to move upwards. They reached out to steady themselves against the bulkhead. As the sub broke the surface of the dark waters, the cabin grew a little lighter.

Venus moved to one of the Terror Fish's eye portals and stared out into the gloom. "We seem to be in some kind of huge cave, I think..." The doctor suddenly leapt back in horror as a blinding beam of white light cut through the outer darkness and struck the glass. A searing electrical sound filled the control cabin as a circular section of the portal dissolved, and then thick choking gas poured through the hole.

Venus hacked and coughed. This all seemed so familiar somehow. She was dimly aware of the rifle slipping from her fingers. Her whole body felt numb.

Marina steadied the swaying space doctor, as a grotesque creature stared in through the hole in the eye portal. It held a rifle-like weapon in its green, scaly hands. The creature looked similar to one of Titan's Aquaphibians, except that it was stockier of build and had a fierce determination in its eyes which was lacking in Titan's slave race.

Using her free hand, Marina aimed her rifle at the alien. It wouldn't fire. It was utterly useless.

The creature smashed the remaining glass in the eye portal with the butt of its rifle and stepped into the small cabin, firing its gas gun as it came. Within seconds the cabin was full of the dense, choking smoke.

Venus screamed, and lost consciousness almost immediately as the gas took effect. Marina quickly lowered the space doctor's limp form to the deck, before hurling her useless rifle at their attacker. The alien simply brushed it aside with a snort of contempt. Realising that Marina was immune to the

---

gas, the creature now fired its laser in her direction. She was forced to dive through the smashed portal and into the darkness beyond to avoid the deadly beams of light.

Marina hit the water some three feet below the level of the shattered eye portal and swam rapidly away into the unknown. She realised that the dark chamber she now found herself in must have been partially drained after they had been ‘swallowed’, and somehow the terror fish had been raised to the surface. That gave Marina some hope. Clearly, their captors did not want Doctor Venus to drown, so it was unlikely that the gas was lethal to humans.

Marina had swum less than a hundred yards from the Terror Fish when she heard a splash behind her. Turning, she saw that the alien was now swimming towards her. Fearfully she dived down into the dark depths, striving to evade her pursuer.

-----

Deep beneath the Pacific Ocean, Titan sat brooding in his palace. He glared down at X2-Zero as he entered.

“X2-Zero! How can this be?” Titan demanded. “How is it that the Terraineans have such a weapon of mass destruction — and yet I was not informed?”

“Your Majesty,” pleaded the surface agent, “I had no knowledge of this vessel. I do not understand...”

“You are a fool X2-Zero. The Terraineans have secretly developed a weapon that could spell the end of our civilisation.”

Titan left his throne and stepped down to gaze out of the windows to the ocean beyond. “A dozen of my Mechanical Fish intercepted that behemoth. All were brushed aside and left powerless on the seabed.”

“Mighty Titan...” X2-Zero ventured nervously, “I have more news. A small submarine was found abandoned at the eastern perimeter of the city.”

Titan turned abruptly, now giving X2-Zero his full attention. "And?"

"The submarine was of a type constructed by Aphony's people. A one person high speed scout craft."

"Marina!" hissed Titan. "She is the only Pacifican who would dare to come here in secret. Then she has been here spying for the Terraineans. Pacifica will pay dearly for this outrage!"

"But your Majesty, what of the Terraineans?"

"X2-Zero, we must prepare for war. We must destroy the Terraineans; before they destroy all of us."

-----

Now many light years away, Stingray was hurtling through space trapped in the huge hangars of the alien submarine space craft. Artificial gravity inside the alien vessel removed all sensation of its enormous velocity.

"Getting harder to breathe Phones," gasped Troy as he sat slumped at the controls. "We'll have to resort to the oxygen tanks soon if we can't get the power back on."

Suddenly both men felt Stingray change her orientation.

"We're surfacing Skipper," Phones said in surprise. "I don't know how but we are surfacing!"

"I can't see a thing," Troy complained as they broke the surface. "If only Marina were here. Her eyes are used to..." He stopped abruptly when a dull scraping sound suddenly echoed through the control cabin.

"Troy! There's someone out there, on the hull..."

-----

Deep in space Fireball XL5 was drawing closer to the two huge alien spacecraft ahead, her powerful engines still delivering maximum thrust.

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Steve activated the neutroni radio and contacted Commander Zero at Space City, "Commander, we're entering interceptor range of the two alien ships. We're getting no response to our radio calls."

"Okay, Steve, any sign of the other cra..."

The radio spluttered briefly and then fell silent.

"Come in Space City. Come in Space City." Steve repeated, trying to re-establish contact with Earth, but the radio remained silent.

"No good Steve," Matt called over the ship's intercom. "Something is jamming the neutroni... I'm trying to pinpoint the source of the trouble."

As the Professor made careful adjustments to his instruments, an ominous image slowly took shape on his screen. "Steve! Another of those ships just appeared on the astroscope! Extreme range and directly behind us. It's closing fast!"

"Then I guess it's time to start evening-up the odds," Steve said grimly, as he readied the interceptors.

On both sides of the ship's nosecone, hatches swung open and racks of missiles slid out into firing position.

"Okay Robert, one, five-zero red. Fire interceptors one and two!"

There was no reply from Robert. Steve glanced across to his robot co-pilot. To his horror he saw Robert's head was slumped to one side, his claw hands still locked to the steering control.

"Robert!" he exclaimed and then turned his attention to firing the missiles himself. His console was completely dead.

Steve suddenly became very aware that he could no longer hear Fireball's engines; the engines that seconds ago had been screaming with power.

“Matt!” he called to the intercom, but it was useless. Fireball had lost all power. Steve felt a sickening feeling in his stomach as he began to float upward from his seat in a now weightless environment.

-----

Oblivious to the plight of Fireball XL5, deep in the gloomy darkness of the alien space-sub’s cavernous hold, the Stingray crew had troubles of their own.

“Phones, keep your eyes peeled. I’m going out there,” Troy ordered urgently as he headed for Stingray’s upper hatch. “And have your gun ready!”

“Sure thing Skipper.” Phones drew his gun and moved over to the windows, listening for more sounds of their unknown visitor.

Troy began turning the wheel that manually opened the upper hatch of the sub. “See anything Phones?” he called as he began to inch open the hatch.

“No Troy... can’t see a thing. It’s so dark... Wait!” Phones raised his gun as he saw the hideous face of an Aquaphibian leering back at him from the other side of the glass. The figure was aiming a rifle-like gun. “Troy! Starboard hull - he’s armed!”

A ray sprang from the alien’s gun, burning into the glass.

All of a sudden, the alien creature stopped and swung around, firing lances of brilliant white light into the dark waters.

“Now Troy!” Phones yelled.

Troy quickly swung open the hatch and fired half a dozen shots at the alien. It fell into the waters with a heavy splash.

Phones hurried up the ladder after Troy. “You got him Troy...”

“Yeah.... I think I did.... but it’s so dark out there. I could see the light of that crazy gun of his. He was shooting at something in the water....”

“Yeah... he sure was in a temper, and boy was he ugly!”

-----

“Suffering space fish!” Steve thought to himself as he floated inside the control cabin of Fireball XL5. “Must get the magnetic boots.”

Back in the navigation bay, Professor Matic was thinking much the same thing as he bounced across the ceiling. “No power... that’s crazy... battery supply should have switched in...”

Seizing a wall bracket with both hands Matt began hauling himself along, trying to check the many gauges and dials. They all told him one thing; XL5 was completely without power. “Guess I’ll need some tools...” he muttered as he opened up a locker and carefully pulled out a large spanner.

Steve was fastening his special magnetic boots. They would allow him to move around much more effectively in the weightless environment. But where could he go? He kicked the doors in frustration. They were jammed solid. It was an airtight seal.

He quickly checked every console in Fireball Junior’s cabin. “Nothing... not a single volt of electricity...” He stood by his control chair, casting an anxious glance at the millions of stars ahead of him. Although there was no sensation of movement, and only the sound of his own breathing, Steve knew Fireball was still at top speed, hurtling through space. “If I can’t get the retro rockets to fire we’ve had it...”

A dull clanging noise suddenly attracted his attention. He listened carefully, then crouching down he pressed one ear to the deck. “It must be Matt! He’s tapping out something in the space code...”

Professor Matic waited anxiously in the darkness with only the faint light of stars from the portholes providing any illumination. He clutched the spanner in his hand, as he waited to see if Steve had heard his tapped out

message. He didn't have to wait long, he soon heard the faint ringing noise of Steve tapping out his reply.

"Well, that's one thing we don't have to worry about." Matt thought to himself. "No sign of the aliens; they've left us for dead. But with no power... I guess we've had it."

Matt reached inside a maintenance hatch and pulled the emergency hydraulic release lever. "That'll take care of the doors..."

Over in Fireball's cockpit Steve almost jumped as the cabin doors hissed open. He immediately hurried back towards the navigation bay, his magnetic boots clanging against the deck. "Well done Matt!"

Matt was standing beside a porthole, peering at a space chart in his hands. He looked up absently, "Thanks Steve..."

"What happened to the power Professor?"

Matt didn't reply for almost a minute, he was busy making mental calculations. "Steve we're in big trouble."

"Yeah... I noticed. How can we get the power back on?"

"We can't Steve. Nothing works; main power, emergency batteries, lighting... why even my wrist watch has stopped working."

"And my ray gun," added Steve. "It's a good thing those aliens didn't try to board us..."

"Might have been better if they had Steve", Matt pointed at his chart, "We are at maximum speed... no way of slowing down... and we are headed directly towards a star!"

Perhaps it was imagination, but Steve was sure that the navigation bay wasn't as dark as it was when he'd first entered, and it was a little warmer...

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Marina was swimming furiously. She had to escape the Aquaphibian-like creature if she was to stand any chance of rescuing Doctor Venus and escaping from this alien place.

The creature was still following her. She could sense it getting closer even though she was swimming as fast as she could. She'd been forced to swim near the surface to use what little light there was. Her eyes could normally see quite clearly at great depths but here there was no light at all below fifty feet — nothing to give off the natural luminescence found in the deep ocean trenches she was familiar with. She was beginning to tire when a fantastic sight gave her new hope — Stingray!

Marina surfaced and swam towards the supersub only to be met by a barrage of energy bolts that cut through the darkness like lightning. Another creature was standing on Stingray's hull firing down at her!

She dived to avoid being hit by the deadly rays only to see her pursuer almost upon her. Frantically Marina swam beneath Stingray's hull to use the sub as a shield. She heard the muffled sound of gun shots from above and then a heavy splash brought the body of the other creature into the water beside her, but this one was dead!

Marina quickly grabbed the rifle-like weapon floating beside the body and fired it at her pursuer — and missed!

Still gripping the weapon Marina managed to climb up onto Stingray's hull and turned to fire a second time before the creature could follow. This time the deadly beam hit it and punched a grisly hole right through its green chest.

A second dead creature now floated beside Stingray.

"Marina," gasped Troy, shocked disbelief on his face.

She ran joyfully into her captain's arms.

Having greeted Troy and Phones, Marina turned and pointed out into the darkness.

“What is it Marina?” Troy asked peering into the blackness, “More of those creatures?”

She shook her head.

“Gee Skipper,” Phones said in exasperation, “if only Marina could talk. Sure is a pity that translator gadget of hers is as dead as all the other equipment.”

“Yeah...” Troy agreed, “Good job our guns still work.”

Marina tugged at Troy’s sleeve and gestured again.

Troy looked into her troubled face, “Marina, are you telling us there’s a danger out there?”

Again Marina shook her head, this time more vigorously.

“Phones, you stay here and watch for trouble. I’m getting my wetsuit and breathing gear and going out there.”

Marina was now nodding, which at least meant she approved of Troy’s decision.

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Aboard Fireball XL5, Steve and Matt were trying desperately to come up with a plan of action.

“Matt, we have to get the power back on. If we could only fire the retros...”

“It’s no good Steve.” Matt sounded weary. “The atomic motors are dead and so are all the emergency batteries...” He frowned. “...Now what could do that...”

“Must’ve been some kind of ray from those aliens,” Steve suggested.

Matt continued as if in a conversation of his own, "Yeah... atomic reactions... all stopped... it must be some kind of nuclear retardant, it's stopped the nuclear reactions."

"But all our power is atomic Matt... Even the thruster packs and jetmobiles have atomic power cells."

"Power cells!" Matt snapped his fingers. "Why, that's the answer Steve!"

"It is?"

Matt rushed out of the navigation bay, almost tripping in his heavy boots. "C'mon Steve. Gotta get to the lab... We can rig up a chemical battery."

"What good will that do us Matt?" Steve called after him as he followed the scientist down the corridor.

"I reckon we can rig something to fire the interceptor missiles... They're still ready for launching..."

"But Matt, firing the missiles won't slow us down much at this speed."

"Nope, they won't slow us down. But I'm hoping the recoil might make a slight change to our course that just might buy us some time."

-----

A full moon shone down upon the blue-grey hull of a huge World Navy submarine, as it lay drifting in the Pacific Ocean.

"Mon dieu! That was one close shave!" Captain Jordan stood on the deck of the Atlantis, all about him his crew were taking in lungfuls of sweet fresh air.

"Thank the stars the manual pumps worked and we were able to surface — eventually..." his exec agreed. "If we'd gone down much deeper..."

"Oui, the hull would have been crushed like an eggshell... But I think we have little reason to thank the stars. Whatever that... that thing was..."

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Jordan pointed upwards to the bright stars above "... it came from out there... Somewhere in space."

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A short time later Commander Zero received an urgent telephone call from the World Navy.

"Listen Ninety," Commander Zero said quickly as he put down the telephone. "That was Admiral Beatty. The navy sub Atlantis has been found. It was hit by some kind of nuclear damping weapon. All her atomic power was neutralized. Lucky for them they managed to surface."

"Sir, if the same weapon was used on XL5..."

"Yeah..." Zero nodded. "At full power she'll be out of control. They'll have no way to slow her down or even send out a distress signal..."

Lieutenant Ninety was checking the locations of nearby patrol ships, "It'll be hours before the nearest ship gets to the area sir. Let me take Fireball XL1. Steve's gonna need help fast."

"Okay Ninety. Find yourself a co-pilot." As Lieutenant Ninety hurriedly left the Control Room, the Commander sounded the general alarm. "Attention launch crews. Prepare Fireball XL1 for emergency launch!"



## **Chapter 6**

### **Breathing Space**

In Fireball XL5's laboratory, Steve Zodiac watched as Professor Matic hastily improvised a chemical battery. How long before they plunged headlong into the star that was waiting for them? He hated the inactivity, but the lab was Matt's domain, and he wasn't much help here.

Matt wiped his brow, "Almost finished this one Steve."

Reaching for a container of acid, he accidentally sent it spinning across the room in the weightless environment.

"Careful Matt!" Steve shouted, grabbing the flask with both hands as it sailed past him. He handed it back to Matt.

"Er... thanks. It's so dark... can hardly see a darn thing. Pass me one of those flashlights from the locker over there."

"Won't do you much good Matt, they won't work." Steve picked up a flashlight and brought it back to the Professor. "Just like all our other electrical gear, useless."

"Not when I connect up this battery. Remove the atomic power cell."

Steve hesitated. "Is that safe?"

"Sure Steve, it'll be totally deactivated."

Steve gingerly opened up the outer casing, and pulled out the power cell. He put it carefully into a cabinet. Years of training and experience had taught him never to leave loose objects floating around in zero G.

In a few moments Matt had his battery installed in the flashlight and the lab was flooded with a dazzling light.

“Now,” he said with satisfaction, “we’ll rig up another battery to ignite the interceptors and we’ll be all set. Er, we’ll have to connect the cables directly to the missiles...”

Steve nodded. “We can’t use thruster packs without power, so we’ll need safety lines and harnesses. I’ll go get them.”

“Fine Steve, I’ll have this gadget ready in five minutes, and meet you in Junior’s starboard missile bay.”

“It’s a good thing we’ve got the oxygen pills,” Steve said as he headed for the door. “Spacesuits would be as useless as the ship’s motors. I guess we use atomic power for everything these days.”

“Yeah... oxygen pills,” Matt muttered as he worked. “We have enough to keep us alive for maybe a week...”

“How’s that Matt?” Steve asked turning back towards the professor. “There’s plenty of air in the tanks. We can use the manual pumps, and we’ve got enough food pills for months.”

“That’s true enough Steve. But without power, this ship will cool down rapidly, and without oxygen pills for protection, we’ll freeze to death.”

“What a tootie I am...” Steve sighed.

“I guess we’ve both got something else on our minds...” Matt said quietly.

“Yeah... We’d both give our lives to save Venus; and we’re dying for nothing... One way or another I guess we’ve had it this time.” Steve sighed with frustration, “We’ll die from the cold... Assuming we don’t burn up in that star first...”

“While there’s life there’s hope,” Matt said firmly.

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Steve forced a smile, “You’re right Matt. We’ll find a way out of all this; and we’ll find Venus too.”

“Better hurry Steve... I reckon we have about fifteen minutes to get those missiles fired — otherwise nothing will stop this ship turning into a real fireball.”

-----

Trillions of miles from Earth, three huge sinister alien submarine spaceships streaked onwards through the starry void. Inside the cavernous hold of one of the ships Troy and Marina had just climbed aboard the terror fish submarine.

Troy gasped when he saw the dead bodies, “Well I guess these two Aquaphibians won’t bother us... Looks like they were shot.”

Marina nodded and pointed to herself, and then back to the Aquaphibians lying on the deck.

“They had you prisoner I guess,” Troy said, trying to piece together the puzzle, “but who rescued you?”

Marina shook her head and made signs with her hand to indicate she’d shot the Aquaphibians herself.

“You did this? Well done Marina.” Troy looked around, cautiously sniffing the air, “Doesn’t smell too good in here... no sense in hanging around. Guess we’d better get back to Phones now.”

Marina grabbed Troy’s arm and started frantically looking around in the darkness.

“But what are we looking for Marina? What’s so important?”

Marina thought for a long moment and then picked up a piece of the shattered eye port glass and breathed on it. Carefully she traced out a pattern with her finger.

“Say, what you are drawing Marina.... A circle... And a cross... Heck that’s the symbol for Venus...”

Marina nodded and pointed to a pile of ropes in the corner of the cabin, and then back to the symbol she’d drawn on the glass.

“She was here? Doctor Venus was here?” Troy saw the pain on Marina’s face and knew he’d understood.

-----

Phones was standing guard on Stingray’s upper hull, his WASP pistol held at the ready, as he waited for Troy and Marina to return. They had been gone for less than half an hour, but it felt like an eternity to the hydrophone operator. He had changed into his wet suit in case he had to abandon the supersub in a hurry; which wasn’t a pleasant thought in this dark, alien environment.

Suddenly he heard a splash behind him. He spun around but could not see a thing in the darkness. His heart pounded as he squinted to see what had made the noise. “Troy, Marina. Is that you?” Phones called, nervously, but no one answered.

His pistol at the ready, Phones moved cautiously around on Stingray’s hull. He heard another splash and turned to see one of the Aquaphibian creatures behind him with its weapon raised. Phones was enveloped in a cloud of choking gas before he could take aim, but he still managed to fire off two shots before he lost consciousness; both missed their target...

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“Phones!” Troy exclaimed as he heard the distant sound of gunfire. “Marina, we’ve gotta help him!”

Troy and Marina plunged back into the inky waters beside the Terror Fish and began swimming back through the darkness towards Stingray.

-----

Doctor Venus opened her eyes and quickly shut them again because the light was so bright. Where was she? The last she remembered was being rescued by Marina and... then it all came flooding back to her. So the gas was not deadly after all. She opened her eyes again, but gradually this time, to let them acclimatize to the brightness. She could see an arc lamp suspended above her, and surrounding it were a variety of what appeared to be surgical instruments. With cold clarity Venus realised she was on some kind of alien operating table, and she could not move her arms or legs.

For a moment other memories came flooding back. Steve had once saved her from being sacrificed to a sun god on some far-flung world. She’d been tied to an altar; to await the magnified rays of an alien sun. Steve had saved her.... with Zoonie’s help. “Zoonie!” she almost shouted out aloud as she thought of her pet lagoon. For a moment her concerns were for him. Was he still alive? A movement above her brought her mind back to her predicament with a jolt. A claw like instrument was snaking silently down towards her, as if it were some monstrous metallic tentacle.

-----

“Run! Run!” wailed Zoonie over Fireball XL1’s open intercom in the control cabin of the ship, “Zoonie run, Zoonie run!”

“What the heck’s up with that creature?” Sergeant Mahoney asked, with more than a little irritation in his voice.

“I’d better go back and check, he’s possibly still in some kind of shock.” said Lieutenant Ninety.

“Shock? Why that thing’s just an animal Lieutenant. Beats me why you brought it along with us.”

“I’ve told you Mahoney, lazoon are telepathic. He may help us find Doctor Venus and maybe the Colonel and the Professor too...”

“Fat chance!” Mahoney spat. “How in the world could he tell us which way to fly a spaceship?”

Lieutenant Ninety was a little tired of explaining. He headed for the door. “Sooner or later, Sergeant, we’ll catch up with XL5, then we’ll track those aliens to whatever planet they are heading for. Zoonie will help us.”

“Right.” Mahoney replied sceptically. “You’re a brilliant officer to be sure.”

Ninety fumed as he made his way back through the ship. Mahoney was a senior Security Officer at Space City, and would not have been his first choice of co-pilot. But an immediate launch had meant he couldn’t afford to wait for someone better qualified.

Ninety opened the door to the room where Zoonie was being kept, “Hey, settle down fellah, don’t worry.” Zoonie ran to him whimpering. Ninety knelt beside the lazoon and took his paws in his hands.

“Easy Zoonie, it’ll be okay. We’ll find them - you and me.”

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Back on Earth, in the undersea city of Titanica, Titan had made his plans...

“X2-Zero, attend my words.”

“Yes oh Mighty Titan,” the surface agent acknowledged.

“I will pay a visit to the city of Pacifica — the domain of Aphony.”

“But Mighty Titan...”

“Silence!” commanded Titan. “I am aware that the fool does not trust me. However, I will arrive at Pacifica alone and unarmed. He will admit me. He will be curious as to my motives.”

X2-Zero nodded humbly, resisting the temptation to interrupt again.

Titan continued, “It is time to form an undersea Alliance against the Terraineans. Aphony will join us; as will his peace-loving friends.”

The undersea ruler paused, “Well?”

“Oh, er, a most cunning plan your Majesty,” X2-Zero grovelled. “How will you deceive Aphony into siding with you?”

“Imbecile! This is no deception. We have proof that the Terraineans are preparing to invade our oceans, to conquer our cities and enslave our peoples!” Titan pondered for a moment, “I shall take a gift...The old fool likes books. I have just the book to ensure my plan cannot fail. Pacifica will help us, X2-Zero, one way or another...”

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Steve Zodiac and Professor Matic were making a check of their safety lines as they stood in XL5’s starboard missile bay. The hatch was wide open to space and four interceptor missiles sat on their extended launch cradle.

“Now be careful Matt! Without thruster packs there’s no way to move around out there except for crawling along the missile rack.”

“Sure Steve, we can’t even use magnetic boots. They could upset the missiles...”

“Yeah,” agreed Steve, “And we sure don’t want to upset those babies!”

“Don’t worry Steve. It’ll be a cinch.” Matt gave his safety line a final test tug and inched his way out of the hatch. About his waist he’d tied various tools for the task at hand.

Steve followed, carrying the flashlight over his shoulder and trailing four detonator fuses behind him. The oxygen pills they'd taken would allow them to survive in open space for an hour or so and they would only be out there for ten minutes. That's all the time they had to launch the missiles, and stop XL5's headlong plunge into a star.

Matt was soon kneeling beside the first missile, "Okay Steve, give me some light over here. Good," the professor said, as Steve arrived at his side, "hold the light just there." Matt grabbed his spanner and prepared to strike the missile with it.

"Hey!" Steve called in alarm. "Matt be careful!"

"It's okay Steve." Matt gave the missile's dorsal fin a hefty swipe with his spanner. "That ought to do it." He rubbed his arm. "They're making the confounded things tougher these days!"

"When you said you had to adjust the firing angle..." Steve started to say, once his breathing returned.

"We had to do that kind of thing a lot back in the space pioneer days Steve. Hook up a fuse and we'll get the other three missiles ready."

With less than two minutes to spare before they passed the point of no return, all four interceptors had been realigned, and fuses had been attached.

Steve and Matt hurriedly hauled themselves back into XL5's starboard missile bay and strapped themselves to the superstructure. "Fire the missiles Matt," Steve said urgently, "before it's too late!"

Matt pressed a button on his hastily improvised battery-pack... and nothing happened. "One of the cables must be loose!" He told Steve as he hurriedly tightened the push connector on his battery, and pressed the button again.



This time the circuit closed, sending a pulse of electricity down the cables to each missile.

“Keep your head down Steve,” yelled Matt as three missiles hurtled from their launch cradles, dangerously close to the astronauts.

The three interceptors exploded simultaneously in a blaze of energy.

“You’ve done it, Matt” gasped Steve, feeling as if he had been kicked repeatedly by a Martian mule.

“I’m... I’m not so sure Steve...” Matt was finding it difficult to think, let alone speak, “Only... three missiles... launched.”

“Will that do it Matt?”

“Don’t know Steve. Gotta get back to the navigation bay... do some figuring.”

-----

Troy and Marina were still swimming back towards Stingray, keeping near to the surface to make the most of the dim light in the vast chamber. Troy envied the way Marina seemed to move effortlessly through the water. His own limbs were beginning to tire with the exertion. He knew he’d slowed down a little even though he was desperately trying to reach Phones as quickly as he could. If only the Seabugs had been operational, he could have covered the distance in no time.

Marina seemed to sense Troy’s thoughts, or perhaps she’d noticed he was beginning to tire. She turned gracefully in the water and reached out to touch him on the shoulder. Having gained his attention she pointed to the alien rifle she carried. Then she gestured ahead in the direction of Stingray, still a long way out of sight.

Troy knew immediately what Marina intended. She could easily swim much faster than he could. Water was her natural environment, but he was only

human. Phones was in trouble...Troy remembered the two dead Aquaphibians in the Terror Fish and how Marina had shot the space alien that had pursued her. She was a courageous and capable member of the WASP.

Troy pointed upwards and they both swam to the surface so that Troy could speak. He quickly pulled his face-mask up out of the way. "Okay Marina — go on ahead. I'll follow as fast as I can." He briefly touched the girl's hand, "Marina... don't take chances..."

Marina nodded and without a moment's hesitation vanished into the watery depths.

Troy repositioned his face-mask, suddenly feeling very alone. He dived back down into the cool blackness and began swimming as fast as his aching body would move him, his mind wrestling with finding a way to hit back at the aliens and escape. Where were they now? Had the space-sub left Earth? Or were they still somewhere in the depths of the Pacific Ocean? More urgently, was Phones okay? He had to force himself not to question whether he'd made bad decisions. The important thing was to keep a clear head. His life, and the lives of his crew, hung in the balance.

Long minutes passed and then Troy saw that he was drawing near to Stingray. He surfaced once more, his eyes and ears straining for information. He could make out Stingray's familiar silhouette in the distance, but there was no sign of Phones or Marina.

A sudden movement caught his attention, and he turned to see two dark shadowy forms moving silently through the water towards him. He drew his gun and his finger tightened on the trigger. Was it Marina and Phones, he wondered, or was it more of those hideous alien creatures?

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“Do you want the good news or the bad news first, Steve?” asked Matt after pouring over the results of numerous readings he had taken with an ancient sextant from XL5’s astrodome above central control.

“Come on Matt, just tell me.”

“Well the interceptors blasted us away from the star alright.”

“That’s boss, Matt.”

“Don’t get too excited, Steve. We have bought ourselves some time, but not much.” Matt drew a diagram in his notebook.

“Fireball will swing around the star at high velocity, but the gravitational pull will slow us up... rather abruptly — and we don’t have the artificial gravity to compensate...”

“We can take the emergency high acceleration drugs Matt. They’ll knock us out but at least we’ll survive the g-forces.”

“What we won’t survive, is collision with the fifth planet in the star’s system...” Matt drew a smooth arc around the star he’d drawn and added a large cross at the end of it. “There’s nothing we can do Steve. It’s simple celestial mechanics; velocity, gravitation, momentum - all adding up to Fireball running smack into a planet. We’ll be travelling so fast we won’t even have time to burn up in the atmosphere.”

## **Chapter 7**

### **With Friends Like These...**

Fireball XL5's medical laboratory looked dark and foreboding to Steve Zodiac, as he paused in the open doorway. In the cold silent gloom he felt he could almost glimpse Venus at work, peering into a microscope or examining the contents of a test tube. But Venus wasn't here. Would he ever see her alive again? Steve swallowed and forced himself to concentrate as he stepped into the room, the beam from his flashlight sending stark black shadows dancing about him. His heavy magnetic boots echoed noisily with each step. Reaching up to a wall cabinet, the Colonel carefully took out a hypodermic syringe and two small vials of liquid. As he turned back to the door, his flashlight briefly illuminated the professor, who stood waiting outside. Seeing Matt's sorrowful expression, Steve realised that his friend had been worrying about Venus too. He broke the silence, "How long before Fireball starts to slow up Matt?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's great Liz..."

"How goes the search?"

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

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

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

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

“Thanks Liz, you’re boss.”

“Joe... Take care of yourself, uh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes Sam?”

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

“What?!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Commander Shore?” The World President prompted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Interceptor missile residue!" he exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## **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.”

-----

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.

-----

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.”

-----

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?

-----

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!"

-----

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..."

\*\*\*

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...”

-----

“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."

-----  
"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 XLI'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.”

## **Chapter 9**

### **The Man From Atlantis**

In Marineville's currently subterranean control tower, Commander Shore and his daughter watched their monitor screens intently as a dozen hydromic missiles thundered into the clear blue Marineville sky and headed upwards and westwards over the Pacific Ocean.

The Commander spoke softly, "Let's hope this one massive salvo will start, and end, the war in one strike. I guess war with Titan was always on the cards."

"Commander Shore!" Lieutenant Fisher called urgently over the video link, "Commander Shore!"

Shore swung his hover chair around to face the communications panel, "What is it man?" he demanded impatiently.

"The missiles sir - they're off course!"

"Well, correct course Lieutenant. Snap to it!"

"But we can't sir. They just don't respond... Impact zone now south south west six thousand. Area reference four, four, two."

Atlanta looked at her father in horror, "But that's Pacifica! Aphony's city... Marina's people..."

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Far out in space a World Space Patrol security officer suddenly awoke to find himself lying on a bunk in Fireball XL1's jail cell. Strong hands grabbed his collar and pulled him up into a sitting position. "Uh... Zodiac... What did you do?"

Steve Zodiac glared angrily, “More to the point Sergeant, what did you do? I want to know everything. Who are these ‘friends’ of yours and when will they get here?”

Mahoney shrugged, “And why would I be wanting to be spoiling the surprise?”

Steve hauled the sergeant to his feet and shoved him roughly back against the wall. “I’ve no patience for your games Mahoney. What have you been setting up?”

Mahoney looked at his watch, “They’ll be here in an hour, maybe less. They said they were taking you to their base for interrogation.”

“Who are ‘they’?”

Mahoney forced a smile, “Oh, you’ve met them before Colonel, so you have; on planet Zofeit.”

Steve knew what that meant. A race of Aquaphibians had ruthlessly slaughtered everyone on the planet, save for two he and his crew had rescued. “So where’s their base?”

“How should I know? I’ve never been there. It’s some planet somewhere that’s all ocean. Listen Zodiac, I can help you. Earth’s had it. You can’t fight these creatures. They are going to wipe out life on Earth, and then pick off other worlds one by one. They have some kind of super weapon that can’t be beat. Be smart Colonel - we can make a deal - you can help us. Be on the winning side.”

Steve’s grip tightened on Mahoney’s collar, “What super weapon?”

Mahoney gasped, “I’m no scientist. It’s some kind of way of fooling around with the way a star puts out energy, something they got from the Zofeits. Side with us Colonel and you’ll be well rewarded.”

“Mahoney, what happened to Doctor Venus? Do you know?”

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“Of course I know. They came for her... In the big ships. Took her back to their base for experiments.”

“Experiments?” Steve was horrified, “What experiments?”

Mahoney shrugged, “That I don’t know. That’s all they told me... Experiments. Forget her Colonel. Help me, and you can have your pick of the women left on the colony worlds. I’ll see to it you get your fair share of the spoils...”

Steve had heard enough, He drew his ray gun...

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Commander Shore sat in the missile control centre at Marineville. He was studying the readouts on Lieutenant Fisher’s control panel, “You’ve done it Lieutenant! We’ve got some control now.”

“I don’t think we can get any more than this sir. Just basic instruction codes for one missile. Access to everything else is still blocked. We can’t adjust the on-board guidance software at all.”

Shore tapped the screen, “Can we send commands to cause one of those primary hydromic fuses to blow? Would that start a cascade reaction?”

Lieutenant Fisher frowned as he made calculations and double checked the results. “That would work sir. I can rig something to cause a self-destruct.” As he spoke Fisher’s fingers hurriedly keyed in data for transmission. “If we get one missile to explode, it’ll take the rest of them with it.”

“How soon?”

Fisher wiped his brow, “I’ve got it set up sir.” He pointed to a button on the console, “I just have to throw this switch.”

“Good man.” Shore stared at the rapidly changing readouts monitoring the missiles progress towards their target, “We’ll have to detonate those

missiles in the upper atmosphere where the hydromic warheads won't do any harm."

Fisher nodded, "We've got about seven minutes sir."

Atlanta's voice called over the communications link, "Father, the World President is on the videophone."

Commander Shore cursed silently to himself. "Stand by to detonate on my order Fisher." Shore moved his hover chair over to the videophone and activated the screen. "Mr President... Commander Shore here."

"Shore! What the devil is going on? I am speaking from my command HQ. We are tracking your missiles. They are not on course for Titanica!"

"Sir, the guidance systems have been tampered with and their target is now the underwater city of Pacifica. We cannot regain control. I'll have to detonate them in flight."

"No..." The World President fell silent for a moment before continuing, "Do not abort the missile attack. You have launched all of your hydromic missiles for a decisive strike. Those warheads must not be wasted. I don't know how they have been re-directed; but Pacifica is a legitimate secondary target. This will be a crushing blow to the aliens, and likely bring them all to their knees."

"But sir..."

"Commander Shore, you have your orders. I want to see the lair of those treacherous Pacificans wiped off the map!"

The video call terminated. For almost a full minute Commander Shore stared at the blank video screen, deep in thought. Then he steered his chair over to Fisher's control panel. "Lieutenant, call security, have them send a man here on the double."

"Yes sir," Fisher acknowledged, hurrying to the videophone.

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Shore reached out and pushed down a control button. There was a soft click. A thousand miles away over the Pacific, there was a deafening explosion.

“Tracking Station to Commander Shore. All twelve hydromic warheads just detonated.”

“Lieutenant Fisher...” Commander Shore said quietly, “I hereby place myself under arrest - for mutiny.”

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Colonel Steve Zodiac gazed critically at his reflection in the large mirror in XL1’s lounge. “Not a perfect fit, but I guess it’ll do.” He turned to the Professor, “Do you think I’ll pass as a security officer Matt?”

Matt shrugged as he handed over Mahoney’s peaked cap, “If the cap fits...” Steve grinned as he pulled the cap down as far as he could.

“I guess you won’t be winning any best dressed officer contests Steve.”

“Okay Matt, when those Aquaphibians get here, I’m Sergeant Mahoney and you and Ninety will be locked up in the space jail.”

“Yeah,” Matt said ruefully, “Like rats in a trap...”

“Trust me Matt. We have to find the Aquaphibians base and put a stop to whatever it is they are up to.”

“I trust you Steve.” Matt smiled, “Always have and always will.”

Some thirty minutes later, Steve was tracking an incoming object on the central monitor. It registered as about two hundred and fifty feet long, a little shorter than Fireball. “That must be our guests...” Steve thought to himself. He activated the ship’s intercom to ensure that Matt and Ninety would hear everything that happened in the control cabin. “I t’ink that’ll be them now,” he remarked casually, as if to himself. No telling what the aliens might be able to detect at this range.

In the space jail Matt chuckled. "Won't be long now Ninety."

"No Professor," Ninety nodded. "Mahoney will be out for at least five hours... I hope that's long enough."

Matt looked down at the sleeping figure dressed in an ill-fitting colonel's uniform. "Just remember now lieutenant, that's Colonel Zodiac... Mahoney is up front and we don't like him much..."

It wasn't long before Steve saw a sleek grey and white spaceship approaching. It looked very fish-like, with large dorsal and ventral fins. He watched as the ship drew nearer. Fireball XL5 still lay a hundred or so yards away suspended in space on free float.

Steve found himself worrying about what had become of Venus. If all went well, these aliens would reveal their base, and if Mahoney was right, Venus would be there... If they were in time... "If... If... Too many ifs." Steve pushed the thoughts aside. He'd made his guesses, made his plans. Now he had to be Sergeant Mahoney. He had to convince these alien creatures that he was their accomplice.

The alien ship drew closer, coming to a halt between the two Fireball ships. Three figures emerged from a point near the nose of the vessel. They began moving towards Fireball XL1 using thruster packs. They carried large rifles in their arms and they appeared to be swimming through space, their legs moving slowly and rhythmically. There was no sign that they wore any kind of space-suit or breathing gear.

"Guess I'd best be going to welcome my three guests..." Steve announced, to no one in particular, as he headed for the ejection room.

Three large ugly Aquaphibians were soon stepping from the ejection chamber, their rifles held in a way that indicated that they meant business.

Steve recognized these aliens and their weapons. He suppressed a shudder. Creatures like these had massacred the civilized world of Zofeit just over a year ago. He forced himself to smile warmly at his 'guests'.

"Top of the morning to you," he greeted enthusiastically, "'Tis Sergeant Mahoney at your service, to be sure."

One of the green-skinned Aquaphibians gestured with a huge clawed hand.

"Will you be wanting to see the prisoners?" Steve asked brightly.

The alien nodded. He wasn't much of a talker, but he obviously understood English.

Steve nodded in return. "Follow me, er, gentlemen."

Steve led the way down the corridors to the space jail, the aliens pausing suspiciously at every twist and turn.

When they reached the cell, Steve stood back as the three fish-men peered inside. His hand rested casually on his belt, very close to his ray gun. "The fat one there is Professor Matic and the kid is Lieutenant Ninety, Space Commander Zero's assistant. I'm sure they'll both be able to tell you a great deal."

One of the Aquaphibians pointed at the prone figure lying on one of the bunks.

"Ah, he's the star prize, so he is. That ugly one on the bunk is Colonel Steve Zodiac. I guess you've heard of him. I'm afraid he put up a bit of a fight, so he did; but I took care of him..." Steve tapped the ray gun on his belt meaningfully, "He's just knocked out. He'll sleep for hours and hours." Steve smirked when Matt and Ninety began hurling abuse. "Shout all you like," he laughed, "you'll soon be singing a different tune."

Apparently satisfied, the aliens turned and walked back the way they had come. Two of the aliens went back to the ejection room, but the third

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continued on with Steve following until they arrived in Fireball's control cabin. The alien pointed to the co-pilot's seat.

Steve obediently sat down. "Will you be requiring tea or coffee for this flight?"

Ignoring the remark, the alien sat down at XL1's controls. Steve was astounded to see how expertly it began powering up the ship's propulsion systems.

"Of course," he told himself, "Mahoney must have been spying on the WSP for years..."

Within minutes, all three spaceships were moving off. The alien ship taking the lead, with XL1 and XL5 close behind, now piloted by Aquaphibians.

Steve kept a close eye on the instruments, as the ships rapidly accelerated to space velocity 7. There was no way of figuring out their destination. They were already far into uncharted space. No telling how many habitable worlds there might be out here.

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On the western seaboard of the United States, Marineville had resumed its normal above-ground mode of operations. But now the WASP had a new commander, Captain Jacques Jordan of the World Navy, generally referred to in the popular press as 'The Man from Atlantis'.

The Navy captain was finding that his temporary appointment had not been universally welcomed. "Atlanta... Believe me I am sorry about your father." Jordan spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, "After this is over I will do all I can to help him... but..."

"Thank you Captain Jordan. I know... We have a job to do." Atlanta stifled a sob, "That was what he said just before he... He..."

"Committed mutiny?"

“Oh I hate that word. Father is no traitor! He’s a good man!”

“Easy Atlanta. I don’t write the rules, but your father broke them and...”

“Captain Jordan!” Atlanta interrupted, “I respect you as my new commanding officer. But I don’t wish to discuss my father unless you make it an order.”

“As you wish, Lieutenant.” Jordan replied somewhat stiffly. “To business. I want the four new Stingray class submarines crewed and fully operational within three days. Can we do it?”

Atlanta realised that Jordan was still going out of his way to make the best of a difficult situation for them both. Only six months ago she had seriously considered Jacques Jordan as romantic ‘competition’ for poor Troy. Now Troy was missing in action and her father was in prison...

Jordan frowned as he watched Atlanta checking the records, “I have the feeling that if we do not mobilize these subs swiftly... we will not have the opportunity to do so later.”

“The submarines are all tested and ready for action sir. But some of the crew members have several weeks of training still to complete.”

Jordan nodded, “How many men are fully qualified?”

Five officers have fully qualified sir... but only in simulations.”

“Five is enough. They are to be assigned to Stingray class submarines effective immediately for final shakedown. The remaining crew members will have to learn the hard way — in action.”

“Yes Captain. I’ll have Lieutenant Aston take over my duties here in the control tower.”

“Pardon?”

“I was the fifth officer to qualify, sir.”

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Atlanta decided to go straight back to her apartment after her shift ended. She wanted to get a good night's sleep before commencing sea trials in one of the new Stingray class submarines the following day.

She began to prepare a meal for two before realizing that her father was not coming home tonight and she did not know when she would see him again — if ever. She found it hard to accept the events that had led up to this moment.

Atlanta had tried to speak to him on the evening of his arrest but had been denied all access. All she knew was that he had been taken from Marineville by World Security Guards to be imprisoned in an unknown location pending trial by military tribunal.

The day after Sam Shore's arrest World News had announced that World Navy hero Captain Jacques Jordan had been seconded to the WASP as interim Commander in Chief. No reason was given and there had been no mention of Sam Shore's pending trial.

She had called her father's best friend Admiral Jack Denver hoping he could help. He'd promised to try and speak to the WP on Sam's behalf and that was almost a week ago with no further news

The phone rang and jolted Atlanta out of her morbid reverie. She picked up the receiver and heard a familiar voice on the other end of the line.

"Hi Atlanta. How are you holding up my dear?"

"Hi Uncle Jack" said Atlanta "Were you able to speak to the WP about Father?"

"Yes I was." said Denver. "He told me that Sam has been found guilty of treason and that he has been sentenced to life imprisonment on Conva."

“Oh no” gasped Atlanta, trying hard to choke back the tears she felt welling up behind her eyes

“I suppose that’s better than a firing squad” responded Denver bluntly. “I’ve had a lot of meetings with Bandranaik over the years since I was appointed President of the Undersea Research Programme and I’ve always found him a fair and capable leader — but he’s changed. He just would not listen to me when I reminded him that Pacifica’s people have given the URP the utmost co-operation since they were discovered and have constantly proved they are a peace loving race.”

“What can we do to help Father?”

“Leave it with me my dear” said Denver. “I’m going to speak to some of my contacts. I’ll be damned if I’ll let Sam rot away in the Space Pen for the rest of his life”

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The next morning, in the Marineville Control Tower Captain Jordan was studying a security report. Intelligence had discovered a coded document apparently cunningly concealed in Marina’s quarters. Although most of the hand written pages had yet to be decoded, they clearly referred to dates and times and some key WASP personnel were named in plain English; Captain Tempest, Commander Shore and Atlanta Shore. Jordan put the report aside thoughtfully. There was a good chance that once deciphered the document would reveal a great deal about what Marina had been up to during her year with the WASP. They sorely needed that information.

Atlanta suddenly burst into the control room, her anger clearly showing on her face, “Why has Marina’s apartment been sealed off by security?”

“Standard security procedures Lieutenant,” Jordan responded icily. “I’m sure you are aware of them.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Atlanta, the undersea creature known as Marina is almost certainly a spy.”

“How dare you call Marina a ‘creature’!” Atlanta blazed, “And she’s no spy - how can you say such things?”

“Lieutenant, I am your commanding officer and you will accord me the proper respect!”

“Sir,” Atlanta responded hotly, “Marina is a loyal member of the WASP and she’s demonstrated that loyalty on many occasions...”

“It is commendable that you are so loyal to your WASP colleagues Lieutenant. However, World Intelligence sees things differently, very differently. It would seem that Marina has been accessing the WASP data bases on all aspects of operations.”

“But... Marina has been studying... She wants to be an officer...”

“She is absent without leave — sources indicate she’s gone to Titanica. Has it never occurred to you that Titan assigned his most trusted concubine to spy on us? I had my suspicions from the first time I met the treacherous creature.”

Atlanta suddenly slapped Jordan’s face.

Jordan stiffened, “You are on a charge Lieutenant. You are confined to quarters — as of now!”

-----

In the co-pilot's seat of Fireball XL1, Steve Zodiac was growing restless. It had been over five hours since the aliens had boarded the two patrol ships and they'd headed off into uncharted space. He'd made occasional comments to the Aquaphibian pilot during the journey, more to reassure his friends listening in the jail than anything else. There had been no course changes over the last hour and Steve now had a good idea where they were heading. It was time to make his move.

Reaching over to the side console, the Colonel quickly opened ship to ship communications, "Mahoney to XL5. Top of the morning to you."

Over in Fireball XL5, the Aquaphibian pilot glanced quizzically at the radio, then turned in surprise as behind him the doors slid open and Robert entered the control cabin, ray gun in hand.

Back in XL1, the Aquaphibian sitting next to Steve jerked its head around to face him, its mouth opening wide to expose rows of pointed shark-like teeth.

"Hold it!" Steve ordered, quickly drawing his ray gun, "Don't move!"

Without warning, the creature suddenly sprang at Steve, a massive clawed hand knocking the gun from his hand as it fired, the other reaching for his throat.

Steve flung himself back in his chair and pressed a control button as he lashed out with a booted foot. The Aquaphibian was sent flying across the cabin and it crashed into a support girder.

"How do you like zero-G?"

Steve clung to the control console as he armed and fired an interceptor. The missile sped from the nose of Fireball XL1 and blasted the alien escort ship into a thousand fragments.

The Aquaphibian was carefully moving back towards its rifle which still lay beside the pilot's seat.

Bracing his feet against the back of the co-pilot's seat, Steve pushed hard, sending himself soaring across the control cabin towards the closed doors.

He hoped he'd timed this right. If not the doors wouldn't be open by the time he reached them.

The Aquaphibian grabbed its rifle and fired a cloud of poisonous gas just as Steve was disappearing through the opened doors.

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Lieutenant Atlanta Shore was still angry as she walked back to her Marineville apartment, but she was already cooling down fast. She'd struck her commanding officer. He deserved it certainly, but she doubted a court martial would see things the same way. Still, she told herself very firmly, he definitely did deserve it.

As she walked along the road Atlanta became aware of a familiar, vaguely fishy odour. Was it Marina?

Atlanta looked about her. Her orders were to go to her quarters but... had Marina returned? There was a small wooded area beside the road. "Marina?" she called hesitantly as she pushed through the branches and undergrowth. Suddenly, Atlanta stumbled and almost fell. Lying at her feet was the body of a WASP security guard. She quickly knelt to examine the man — he was unconscious.

A sudden movement caught her eye, and as she looked up she saw someone running across the road towards a small blockhouse. "Stop!" Atlanta shouted, but the fleeing figure quickly disappeared inside the building. Atlanta wanted to summon help but there was no sign of the guard's radio. She quickly tugged the gun from his holster and, scrambling back to the road, she ran to the blockhouse.

The blockhouse doors had been broken open. Atlanta stepped inside warily. The telephone had been ripped from the wall and the passenger lift was heading down to the submarine pens. She dashed into the large service elevator and slammed her palm down on the button for emergency descent. The elevator plummeted downwards, Atlanta clinging tightly to one of the grab handles on the wall. Moments later the elevator began to slow and jolted to a stop. The large doors hissed open.

As she emerged from the elevator Atlanta was horrified to see a green-skinned Aquaphibian clubbing a technician with a rifle. She raised her gun to fire at the attacker, but quickly changed her mind. There were dozens of

fuel tanks around. If she could only get to a radio, alert security. But there was no time, her quarry was pulling open the door to Pen 5.

“He’s after Swordfish!” she realized.

Atlanta made a dash for the open pen door.

“Hold it! I have you covered,” she yelled as the Aquaphibian began to open Swordfish’s upper hatch. The creature turned its head to look down at her, as a vicious blow struck her on the back of the head. She fell to the ground, out cold.

“Nice work!” called the fish-man as it hurried back to join its accomplice, a man dressed in WASP overalls.

“Shall I finish her off?” the man asked.

The fish-man shook his ugly head, “No need for that; she only saw me. I guess one more witness won’t hurt.” the creature casually turned Atlanta over with a large webbed foot. “Wait a minute. This is Atlanta Shore, the Commander’s daughter. I’ve got an idea. Help me get her aboard and let’s get out of here.”

A few minutes later Swordfish was speeding down the long tunnel leading to the sea. A sting missile made short work of the Ocean Door and the submarine was sea-borne.

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Zodiac thudded heavily to the deck of XL1’s jetmobile bay as Junior’s gravity was suddenly restored. He needed a ray gun and fast. Getting hastily to his feet Steve hurried over to where two jetmobiles were parked.

Behind him, the airlock doors slid open and black smoke began pouring into the bay.

Steve reached the jetmobiles but to his dismay he realised that they were not armed. The smoke was filling the room now and Steve could barely see.



He managed to take an oxygen pill from a pocket and quickly swallowed it. It was no use. The gas was still making him choke. He covered his mouth and nose with his hands as his senses reeled. He knew he was going to pass out, probably for good.

The Aquaphibian stepped into the doorway, its head darting from side to side as it searched for its prey.

Behind a jetmobile Steve was weakly reaching up to the handlebars. He desperately pressed a control stud. For a long moment nothing seemed to happen. Then he felt the air around him begin to move. Grabbing the jetmobile with both hands he held on as tightly as he could.

There was a sudden loud shrieking of air as the jetmobile bay roof hatch opened. The choking smoke, together with the Aquaphibian, made a very rapid exit into outer space.

In the now eerily quiet jetmobile bay Steve slumped groggily to the deck and almost immediately passed out.

-----

Titan, mighty ruler of the undersea city of Titanica, stood gazing through an oval window, looking out into his deep watery realm. He was disturbed by the events of the past few days. He was uncertain of his next move. He needed counsel; wise counsel. But where was Teufel, the fish god? Why would he abandon Titan at a time of such great need? Had Teufel turned his face from him? Someone would pay dearly for causing Titan to fall from favour, very dearly indeed.

Titan turned and glowered as two Aquaphibian guards entered and flung Surface Agent X2-Zero unceremoniously to the palace floor. He sprawled at the undersea ruler's feet, not daring to meet Titan's eyes, "You... You summoned me O Mighty Titan?"

At a sign from Titan the guards stepped back a few paces, levelling their rifles at the hapless agent. "You have one marine minute to explain your failure," Titan snapped.

"Your... Your Majesty. The Terraineans were able to detonate the missiles by remote control."

"Fool! Why did you allow this to happen?"

"I... I... That is..."

"Enough!" Titan bellowed. He gestured to his guards, "Take him to the shark pens!"

But O Wise One... I have urgent news."

Titan raised a hand, the two Aquaphibians halted. "News?"

Yes, O Mighty One. I have been monitoring Terrainean communications. Causing the destruction of the missiles was your master stroke."

"My master stroke? Explain!"

"Your Majesty, Commander Shore has been arrested for treason because of his failure to destroy Pacifica."

"Indeed?" Titan frowned thoughtfully, "Continue."

"The Terrainean ruler believes that Aphony is in league with mighty Titanica. He has dissolved all diplomatic links with Pacifica. The failed missile attack has been quietened down in secrecy to prevent embarrassment and humiliation for the surface ruler."

"Wait..." Titan commanded as he stepped up to his elevated throne. He sat there, deep in thought, his chin resting on his clasped hands. After a few moments he smiled with grim satisfaction.

"Get up off the floor, idiot!" Titan commanded. "So, I have saved the peaceful city of Pacifica from certain destruction at the hands of the evil

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Terraineans.” Titan stood, gesturing with his right hand, “I have reached out and saved my allies in their darkest hour! Shore is clearly but a scapegoat for the Terrainean failure. I, mighty Titan, destroyed the hydromic missiles!”

Titan sat back down on his throne, leaning forward to gaze down at his minion. “X2-Zero, your life is spared... For the time being. You will summon Aphony to Titanica immediately, in order that he pay homage to his powerful ally. Then Aphony will gather together his friends in other cities and we will unite all of the undersea peoples to a mutual goal — to crush the accursed surface dwellers!”

-----

Atlanta gradually became aware of a noxious fishy smell, and a throbbing pain in her head. She opened her eyes and suddenly jerked back her head as she saw a hideous green face, only inches from her own. She tried to move, but soon realized that ropes had been used to tie her tightly to Swordfish’s pilot’s seat. Something had also been tied around her mouth.

The creature stepped back. Its green skin and bulbous eyes — together with the smell — left no doubt in her mind that this was one of Titan’s allies. It continued to stare at her intently for a moment, and then spoke in perfect English, “She just woke up; too bad.”

Atlanta felt hands resting heavily on the back of her chair. She tried to turn around but the ropes held her fast.

“Well Lieutenant Shore, I bet you are wondering what’s happening, right?” The speaker standing behind her apparently elected to take Atlanta’s stifled utterances as an affirmative, and he continued, “For your information, we’re on the seabed, about five hundred miles or so from the coast. We’re leaving now. You can just relax here while you wait for the hydromic depth charges”.

The fish-man nodded, "Regrettable but necessary I'm afraid," He tore off the green wig and mask, "Come on Al, time to get picked up."

"Yeah," Al laughed and patted Atlanta on the head, "So long little girl. I do hope you like fireworks."

"Knock it off Al. Sometimes I think you enjoy your work a little too much. Beats me why World Intelligence employs people like you."

"Who says I shouldn't enjoy my work? Besides, if you don't want the dame to suffer you could just blow her head off with your fish-man rifle."

"Don't be so dumb, that'd spoil my plan. The WASP will look for bodies in the wreckage. It looks like she's got a nice body — and it's better they don't find holes blasted through it by an Aquaphibian rifle. After all, Atlanta Shore is a traitor, just like her father, another of Titan's friends."

Al moved forward to get a better look at Atlanta. Grabbing her hair, he pulled her head around to face him, "Yeah, she's a real good looker ain't she?"

Atlanta lashed out with a booted foot, but didn't manage to connect with her target.

Al laughed and glanced at his watch, "We've still got time to get better acquainted..."

Al was roughly pulled away by his colleague, "You should have thought of that earlier, instead of spending the time whining about how she'd got in our way. Come on! Move it! That navy sub out there won't wait forever."

A few minutes later, Atlanta watched through Swordfish's window as two wet-suited figures emerged from the forward hatch. One of them began flashing a light. As she watched, another light flashed from somewhere in the distance. One of the swimmers turned briefly to wave in her direction

## **Chapter 10**

### **Seek And Destroy!**

"Easy Steve, take it easy."

Steve Zodiac opened his eyes to see Matt leaning over him and looking very concerned.

"Matt?"

"What happened Steve? We heard a ruckus after you sent the code message to Robert, thought we'd better let ourselves out of the jail and see if we could help."

Steve sat up and looked around. The jetmobile bay hatch was closed and the air felt good.

"I guess the Aquaphibian was too fast for me Matt. Used his gas gun. Had no choice, had to depressurize to get rid of it."

Matt helped Steve to get to his feet, "Ninety's at the controls. Steve, we're worried about Robert."

"What's happened to Robert?"

"We don't know Steve. XL5 is still flying alongside, but Robert's not responding to the radio. Junior's control cabin is full of that gas so we can't see what's happening over there."

Ninety looked anxiously back from the pilot's seat as Steve and Matt entered the control cabin. "Still no response from Robert, Colonel."

Steve sat down in the co-pilot's seat. He could see a close-up of XL5's smoke filled control cabin on the central monitor.

"Professor, could that smoke harm Robert?"

"I doubt it Steve."

"The radio might be out..."

"No Colonel," Ninety told him, "I checked it out. Tried all frequencies."

Steve was now fully alert, "Matt you and I are going across. Grab us a couple of gas masks and I'll meet you in the ejection room. Keep your eyes peeled Ninety, let us know if you see anything."

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Once again, Marineville was at Battle Stations, hidden deep in its underground bunker.

Captain Jordan still found it hard to believe that Atlanta Shore was a traitor, but the evidence was clear enough. An injured security guard, a stolen gun found in the Swordfish pen with Atlanta's fingerprints on it and, most damning of all, video images of Swordfish emerging from the shattered Ocean Door, with Atlanta Shore at the controls and an Aquaphibian at her side.

Clearly, Atlanta had been working in collusion with Marina for some time. When Marina's apartment had been sealed off by security, Atlanta must have known that evidence would soon be found that she was also a spy.

How many more of Titan's agents had infiltrated Marineville? Jordan glanced suspiciously over at Lieutenant Fisher, who was busy coordinating the search for the stolen submarine.

When Swordfish had blasted its way out into the Pacific Ocean, Lieutenant Fisher had immediately volunteered to take Barracuda in pursuit. Some sixth sense had warned Jordan to keep all the Stingray class subs where they were, in their pens. A quick search had revealed that coralamitic explosives had been planted aboard each of the remaining three supersubs. The launch of any one of them would have resulted in massive explosions.

No, Jordan told himself, Fisher must be in the clear, he'd have surely died if he'd tried to take a sub out in pursuit of Swordfish.

Captain Jordan had his orders directly from the World President. Swordfish must be destroyed at all costs

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"If I were back at Marineville," Atlanta Shore thought grimly, "I guess I'd be sending Spearhead jets to blow this sub clean out of the water... I've got to do something... Got to..."

Atlanta's struggles were to no avail; her abductors had tied her very securely to her seat. She couldn't move her arms at all. "Useless! I can't die like this... I can't..."

With an effort of will Atlanta managed to become calmer and forced herself to think. "They were signalling... I've got to send a signal too — contact Marineville." Atlanta glanced across the console to the radio. "That's a joke, tied up like this there's no way to even switch it on."

-----

Steve and Matt had used their thruster packs to travel over to XL5 and were now cautiously making their way across to the ejection hatch.

"We could be walking into a trap Matt. I'll go inside first. Wait until I give you the all clear."

"Don't take any chances Steve..."

"I won't. I'm shooting first this time. Talk can come later. Same goes for you Professor. Don't wait for an order, shoot on sight. Here goes..."

Matt watched as Steve positioned himself above the hatch in Fireball's upper hull and then slowly disappeared, feet first into the ship.

He waited nervously outside XL5's ejection hatch, his ray gun clenched tightly in his hand. He was relieved when he heard Steve call on his radio,"

"All clear Matt. No sign of the Aquaphibian and the air's okay here."

"Okay Steve, I'm coming aboard."

Steve looked up from a wall console as the Professor stepped out of the ejection tube, "I've activated Fireball's air purification system. While that's taking effect we'll head on up to the main control cabin."

"Okay, Steve."

"Keep your gas mask on just in case, Matt. No telling where that Aquaphibian could be lurking."

As they warily made their way along Fireball's corridors, Steve covered the way ahead with his ray gun, whilst Matt watched out nervously for anyone or anything following them.

Finally they arrived at the main airlock doors of Fireball Junior. The doors had closed automatically when the ship's internal systems had detected the poisonous gas.

"Keep your mask on Matt. If the Aquaphibian is in here it'll use its gas gun for sure."

Steve triggered the manual airlock over-ride and the doors hissed open.

"Don't let the creature get close. They can move fast when they want to."

As the two men made their way through the jetmobile bay the air was more or less free of any sign of the poison gas.

Steve called up Lieutenant Ninety on a secure channel.

"How's the control cabin looking Ninety? We're about to go in."

"It's almost clear of the smoke now Colonel. There's no-one in the pilot seats, and no sign of any movement."



Matt looked anxiously over his shoulder, "He could be anywhere in the ship Steve."

"My guess is he's still in the control cabin Matt and so is Robert... Ready? We'll move in there fast and take control."

Matt checked his ray gun, "Ready Steve."

"Okay, shoot on sight Matt, we're taking no chances."

The control cabin doors slid open, and Steve rushed inside, pistol at the ready. Clouds of the remaining poisonous smoke billowed around his boots.

"Steve!" Matt called out as he almost stumbled over the inert form of Robert lying on the deck. Beside the robot lay the prone unmoving form of the Aquaphibian.

"Get the first aid kit Matt, looks like it's injured."

"It's no use Steve. It's dead. I think it's been electrocuted."

Steve turned his attention to the robot, its head lay at an odd angle against its shoulders. "What about Robert?"

The Professor crouched down beside the robot and inspected the damage. "I think I can fix him Steve. Looks like our Aquaphibian friend tried to crush his neck. Guess he wasn't expecting the high voltage."

-----

In the Marineville control tower, Lieutenant Fisher looked up from his communications console, "Sir, World Navy reports a positive sighting. Reference one one three, five two one. Swordfish on or near seabed. Running silent."

Captain Jordan nodded, "They have not gotten far..." He walked quickly over to Fisher's console and snapped on the radio, "Tower to Spearhead Flight Leader..."

“Spearhead Flight Leader to Tower. Receiving you. Over...”

“This is Captain Jordan. Target vessel has been detected at position one one three, five two one. Target appears to be adopting silent running, possibly stationary on the ocean floor. Seek and destroy target — repeat — Seek and destroy!”

“Flight Leader to Tower, PWOR. E.T.A. four minutes.”

Lieutenant Fisher was glad that he hadn’t had to relay that order.

It was a death sentence for Atlanta Shore...

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Atlanta Shore was painfully aware of the minutes ticking by as she sat helplessly at the controls of Swordfish. She remembered another time, another submarine. She’d faced death then and had come up with a solution. “The engines... If I can switch them on and off... Might get picked up by sonar. I don’t have to be original. I just have to stop that missile attack.” Somehow it had been a lot easier the last time; for one thing she had not been tied to her seat.

The engine control lever was at shoulder level. Atlanta tried to reach the lever with her chin, straining forward against the ropes that bound her, but it was useless. She thought for a moment and then hurriedly began prizing off her right boot with her left foot. It took several more precious minutes but finally the boot fell to the deck.

“Now... Let’s see if my yoga lessons were worth all that time and effort...” Leaning back in the chair, Atlanta raised her right leg as high as she could. Her foot made contact with the control lever. “Not exactly comfortable...” she winced. Gradually she brought the lever down, then pushed it back up again. “Getting the hang of it. Now for some Morse code. I just hope somebody up there is listening...”

-----

Flying low over the Pacific, a squadron of WASP Spearhead jets was preparing to attack their target. Sonar buoys had been dropped into the sea in the target area. Now they were sending back 3D sound pictures, pinpointing Swordfish's location on the seabed.

"Spearhead Flight Leader to Tower. Swordfish located on ocean floor. Preparing to make attack run. Say... Sonar is picking up engine noise. Guess they're making a run for it! Beginning attack... Now!"

Five jets screamed over the waves, each firing an air to sea missile. The missiles plunged into the ocean and dived towards their target.

Atlanta went rigid with fear as explosions began to rock Swordfish.

"Too late..." she continued her operation of the engine lever, if only to concentrate on something other than certain death. She could hear the hull creaking under the intense pressure of the blasts and somewhere behind her, water was starting to pour noisily onto the deck.

"Missed!" reported the squadron leader. "Circling around for another run... This time we'll get her for sure."

In the Marineville Control Tower, Captain Jordan was staring incredulously at a video screen. The screen displayed the sonar pattern relayed from the Spearhead aircraft as a ragged line. "Mon dieu!" he exclaimed, "Morse code!" on his monitor the captain could clearly read the coded signal from the engine noise, "... we surrender... we surrender..."

Jordan slammed his hand down on the radio transmit button, "Break off the attack! This is Jordan. Do you hear me? Break off, abort attack!"

Two missiles had already left the leading aircraft as the attack was cancelled. The missiles plunged into the ocean, exploding seconds later, sending plumes of water hundreds of feet into the air.

“This is Flight Leader... Attack aborted... Standing by for further orders.”

Captain Jordan wiped his brow, “So... Am I next for the chop for disobeying

-----

“Lieutenant Drake!” Commander Zero bellowed, as he sat at his desk in the control room at Space City. “Where in blazes are XL3 and XL14?”

“They’ll be here within two hours Commander,” the Lieutenant answered nervously. “Fireball XL17 will be ready for launch in thirty minutes, sir.”

Zero could see the worry in the young lieutenant’s eyes. He walked over to join her beside the space sector charts. “Lieutenant, we’re not writing them off; they are just ‘out of contact’.”

“Yes sir.”

“They’ll be okay, you’ll see. Ninety’s one of the best... One of the best.”

“Sir... I...”

The telephone began to ring.

“What in thunder!” Zero exclaimed as he hurried back to his desk, “Why can’t I get some peace and quiet around here!”

He grabbed the receiver, “Zero here, make it snappy!” His demeanour changed abruptly, “Mister President... Sir... We... That is, I am doing all I can here...”

The World President cut in, “No need for explanations Zero. I know the situation. You and I both served in the last space-war. We are veterans. I can talk to you man to man.”

“Sir?”

“Listen Wilbur, I can see that the World Space Patrol is inadequately funded.”

“It is? Er yes, it is sir.”

“We’ve lost good people due to this miserly shoe string budgeting. That’s changing as of now. I want you to draft up plans for a real space navy. Earth needs space warships; the best money can buy.”

“But the United Planets Organisation... The Regular Treaty...”

“The UPO can bleat all they like — we have a destiny, a duty — to rule this universe.”

“Yes sir,” Zero acknowledged cautiously. “But...”

“I know what you’re going to say Wilbur, you need the men as well as the ships. But see here, you’ve got good men out there commanding tiny ships. Put those men in command of battle cruisers. The crews can be reassigned from the Army, they can follow orders and press buttons as well as any. No need for the handpicked ‘best of the best’ approach. You’ll need brawn as well as brains for those ships.”

“Yes sir. I understand sir.”

“Send me details of what you need for your space fleet, and I’ll see to it that you get the funding.”

“Sir? Er, I’ll have to speak with General Rossiter, he...”

“From now on, Space General Zero, you report directly to me. Understood?”

“Er... Yes sir. Understood sir.”

“Good man.”

As Space General Wilbur J. Zero hung up the phone his eyes had a glazed look.

“Bad news sir?” Drake asked hesitantly.

“I’m not sure Lieutenant... Maybe it’s Christmas.”

## **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.”

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“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?”



## **Chapter 12**

### **Means To An End**

Captain Jacques Jordan stepped out of his Marineville apartment and into the cool early morning air. He glanced at his watch, it was just after 4am. He hadn't even attempted to sleep; there were far too many things on his mind.

Firstly, he had to release Lieutenant Shore from her cell. All the facts seemed to back her story - and Admiral Beatty had indicated that he also believed she was telling the truth. Jordan frowned as he remembered the video-phone call. There had been something in Beatty's eyes that he hadn't liked. Still, one thing at a time...

As he drove towards the detention centre, the navy captain began to feel more optimistic. He would tell Atlanta that he believed her story. They would work together, not against each other. Besides, he owed the girl an apology. He would get this whole mess sorted out.

A WASP security guard hastily stubbed out his cigarette when he saw the Captain's car pulling up outside. He saluted smartly when Jordan entered.

Jordan returned the guard's salute. "Lieutenant Shore is to be released, all charges are dropped."

"I'm sorry sir, there's been some trouble..."

"Trouble? What do you mean man?"

"Er, the Lieutenant sir, Lieutenant Shore, she, she's dead sir. Committed suicide in her cell."

Jordan froze, "Dead? When did this happen? Why wasn't I notified?"

“Er... World Intelligence sir, they said...”

Jordan turned as an inner door swung open.

“That’s all right Higgs,” a grey suited man said softly, “I’ll deal with this.” The man stepped forward confidently, flourishing an I.D. card, “Taylor, World Intelligence Network. With respect Captain Jordan, this is now a World Security matter. I must ask you to leave.”

“Nonsense!” I am the Commander here and I demand to know what has happened!”

As Taylor returned his I.D. card to an inner pocket, he exchanged a meaningful glance with the security guard. “I’ll just take your gun Captain,” he said quietly, as Higgs stepped quickly behind Jordan grabbing his arms and pinning them to his sides.

Jordan struggled furiously, “This is mutiny!”

The WIN agent smiled coldly and shook his head as he pulled Jordan’s pistol from its holster, “Oh no, Captain Jordan, on the contrary, I assure you that this is Government business...”

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Some important Government business was also being conducted in Unity City — behind closed doors...

“Frankly, Mister President, with all due respect, we don’t have enough public support to fully implement your plans.”

The World President glared across his expansive desk at the grey suited man sitting opposite, “Nonsense! The threat is real. The undersea races must be brought to heel.”

“Yes absolutely Mister President. However, the majority of the general public fail to see the real issues involved. Polls indicate that they don’t appreciate the potential security implications.”

---

“I’ll have somebody’s head for that botched terror attack on Marineville...”

The man in grey shifted uneasily in his seat, “With respect, Mister President, even if the attack had been successful, Marineville was a military target...”

“Meaning?”

“Civilians expect the military to suffer casualties from time to time.”

“Then we need some civilian casualties in order to make them aware of the danger that we face.”

“Quite so sir. Should there be a significant attack on a civilian target, then our cause would gain much support.”

The World President shrugged, “Regrettable, but I guess it would be for the greater good of mankind. We need to strike at the alien sea creatures before they become too strong.”

“May I suggest an attack on a coastal tourist resort, with significant loss of life?”

“Do you have one in mind?”

“No, Mister President, but with your permission, my staff will select one without delay. Somewhere in Australia perhaps?”

The President looked thoughtful, “But how do you propose we lay the blame squarely at the feet of the fish-men?”

“The fish-men don’t own the world media Mister President; you do. The media must comply with your security directives. We shall ensure that the international press paint an appropriate picture — in the interests of World Security of course.”

“Excellent, see to it... But please don’t bore me with the details. I just want results.”

The President pushed back his chair and walked over to the window. He gazed down at the people in the city streets far below, “Just one year ago, I was the undisputed ruler, that is, leader, of this entire planet. Then, those accursed fish-men were discovered... Now I’m mocked by other members of the United Planets Organization. They say I have no right to speak for Earth, that Earth is barbaric and feudal and has no one leader. I intend to wipe out every last one of those vile sea creatures — for the good of all humanity.”

-----

Al Jackson sat on the bunk in Atlanta’s cell, wiping blood from his hands. The WIN agent looked up angrily as the cell door was suddenly swung open, “I said I wasn’t to be disturbed.”

Higgs glanced around the cell. “Who’d have thought there’d have been so much blood!” he ventured, “Real nasty business... Guess that must have hurt real bad.”

Jackson dabbed his bloodstained handkerchief in the general direction of his nose and glared.

Atlanta was standing in a corner of the cell, her hands still handcuffed behind her back, “Let me out of here!” she shouted hoarsely, “He tried to kill me!”

“Really?” the guard asked innocently. “Guess you’d both better come along with me. Captain Jordan’s waiting in the interview room.”

Jackson looked worried, “Jordan’s here?”

Higgs nodded, “Yeah, your buddy sent me to fetch you.”

Atlanta felt a surge of hope as she was led out of the cell and down the corridor. Jackson limped awkwardly along behind, still clutching a handkerchief to his bloodied nose.

Captain Jordan was sitting at a desk. He looked up as Atlanta and the others entered the room.

“Jaques!” Atlanta exclaimed, horrified to see that the Captain was gagged, his wrists tied to the arms of his chair.

“Hello again, Lieutenant Shore.”

Atlanta froze, she recognised that voice.

“I see you are in remarkably good health,” Taylor closed the door, “Al must be losing his touch.”

Atlanta was speechless... so she was going to die after all.

“I see you’ve been getting your kicks Al.” Taylor noted.

“What’s he doing here?” Jackson scowled.

“Captain Jordan? Oh, he came nosing around and asking rather awkward questions about this young lady’s recent suicide. I see she hasn’t quite got the hang of it yet.”

“Very funny. So, what do we do about him?”

“I guess we kill two birds with one stone. We’ll probably get a bonus for this.”

“A jail break?” Jackson asked, suddenly feeling much better.

“Yes. The traitor grabs Jordan’s gun, kills him in cold blood, and then makes a run for it...” Taylor turned to Higgs, “Okay, hold the young lady still for a moment while I dispose of Jordan. Then you can shoot her.”

“Hold on!” Jackson said hurriedly. “There’s always Conva...”

“The Prison Planet?”

“Yeah. Why not? Jordan’s dead body is all the evidence we need that she’s a murdering terrorist.”

Atlanta didn’t like the look of the smirk on Jackson’s face, “What are you talking about?”

“It’s a new government policy honey,” the agent explained, “Conva isn’t subject to Earth law. It’s a handy place to deal with people like you and your father — in any way we want, no questions asked — in the interests of Earth security.”

Taylor nodded approvingly, “Not a bad idea. Under interrogation she can name all her terrorist friends in the WASP so we can remove all the bad apples.”

“I’m no terrorist!”

Jackson laughed, “You’d be amazed at what you’re gonna confess.”

“Why are you doing this?” Atlanta shouted, “Are you working for Titan?”

Taylor managed to look hurt, “Our business is Earth Security. We’re just obeying orders like any good soldiers.” He took Jordan’s navy pistol from his pocket, casually released the safety catch and aimed the gun at the helpless Captain...

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Lieutenant Fisher frowned thoughtfully as he drove his car towards the ramp which led down to the submarine pens. He couldn’t believe the events of the last week. Stingray missing in action; Commander Shore, and now Atlanta, arrested on charges of treason.

He glanced at his watch, he was early. He’d just have time to get over to the detention block before he went out on patrol in Barracuda. He braked

sharply, and turned the car around. He had to hear Atlanta's side of the story. He doubted he'd be allowed to speak to her, but he had to try.

A few minutes later, Fisher was pulling in to the detention block parking area. There was only one other car there, the one allocated to Captain Jacques Jordan. Fisher sighed; he had a feeling that this was going to be a wasted journey.

As he got out of his car, the Lieutenant was startled by a woman's scream — Atlanta? Fisher clenched his fists, and thinking there was liable to be more mutiny before the day was out, raced up the steps to the outer office and flung open the door.

The duty guard wasn't at his post. Warily, Fisher pushed open the inner door. He could hear a voice coming from down the corridor. It was Atlanta. She was shouting something. Then there was a man's voice, not one he recognised. It certainly wasn't Jacques Jordan.

Fisher edged cautiously down the short corridor. The sounds were coming from the interview room. He paused outside the closed door, uncertain what to do next.

Atlanta screamed again. Fisher's hand instinctively went to his holstered gun.

"No!" Atlanta screamed, "Don't shoot!"

Lieutenant Fisher drew his pistol and kicked open the door.

There was Captain Jordan, tied to a chair and being threatened by a gunman.

Jordan flung himself to one side, causing his chair to overbalance and he crashed to the floor — out of the line of fire.

Taylor spun around but Fisher shot first, firing twice. The government man went down instantly, clutching his chest.

Higgs hurriedly backed away, dragging a struggling Atlanta along in front of him as a shield.

"Look out!" Atlanta shouted as Jackson drew his gun from a shoulder holster.

Fisher ducked back as a bullet ricocheted off the steel door.

Jackson laughed, "Throw down the gun, sailor boy, or the lady gets the next bullet."

But the next bullet came from under the desk. Al Jackson fell backwards against the wall; he was dead before his body slid to the ground.

Under the desk, Captain Jordan was lying on his side, still tied to the chair, but now holding his gun. Without saying a word, Higgs tossed his own gun to the floor and raised his hands.

Fisher grabbed the keys from the guard's belt and quickly unlocked Atlanta's handcuffs. She hurried over to help Captain Jordan. Kneeling down beside him she pulled off the gag and untied his wrists.

"Merci Lieutenant Fisher," Jordan said as he slowly got to his feet, rubbing his aching shoulder, "I think you just saved your commanding officer's life."



## **Chapter 13**

### **Defensive Strategy**

“Naturally,” Captain Jordan told Atlanta as they drove back to her Marineville apartment, “all charges against you have been dropped.”

But Atlanta wasn’t really listening. Her world had become one nightmare after another. “Captain Jordan, Marina is no more a traitor than I am.”

Jordan nodded, “I know that now Atlanta. Please — allow me to apologise for my earlier attitude. I think you were right to strike me.”

“But Captain...”

Jordan waved a dismissive hand, “I did not want to see the truth. It was unthinkable. But now it is obvious to me. You and I are pawns in a very dangerous game. And I think I now know who some of the players are.”

Soon Jordan’s car was drawing up outside Atlanta’s apartment. “May I come in Atlanta? I would like to discuss our next move.”

Atlanta managed a smile as she climbed wearily out of the car, “Of course Captain Jordan.”

“Please Atlanta, off duty call me Jacques. We were friends once. Remember?”

Atlanta touched Jordan’s arm as they walked to the door, “We are still friends Jacques.”

“Tres bien! I ‘ave the feeling we need all the friends we can get.”

A short time later Jordan was sitting in Atlanta’s lounge with a cup of steaming coffee while Atlanta took a quick shower. He knew he had to take

action soon — both of their lives were in danger. He was pretty certain that Admiral Beatty was behind the attempt to kill Atlanta. He would have to report their story before they were both silenced. But who should he report to now the World Security Patrol had been dissolved? The World President himself? Did he trust the World President?

“I feel a little more human now Jacques,” Atlanta announced as she joined the captain on the sofa. “I changed out of that uniform, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh, no... No of course not.” Not for the first time, Jordan found himself thinking that the WASP uniform just didn’t do Atlanta’s figure justice. And she had such beautiful legs... “Atlanta, I think you should stay here in your quarters for the time being. I’ll ensure there is someone on guard.”

Atlanta grimaced, “I think I’d be safer without the guard.”

“Yes. But I shall be your guard, for the time being at least.” Jordan checked his watch, “It’s just after eight. I have the feeling we should see what’s on the World News. Do you mind?”

“Good idea Jacques.” Atlanta switched on the television and settled back on the sofa.

“... high level talks in Unity City. So viewers,” newsman Johnny Jackson asked, as pictures of Marineville flashed on the television screen, “what is the real story behind these latest despicable acts perpetrated by the under-sea alliance? Captain Jacques Jordan, acting commander of the World Aquanaut Security Patrol, was not available for comment...”

Jordan snorted, “No-one asked me to comment...”

“As you know, Captain Jordan is the World Navy hero who defeated Titan’s monster submarine...”

“That’s a nice photo of you Jacques.”

“Shhh...”

“So viewers, let’s see if we can put together the pieces of what adds up to a terrifying picture of conspiracy, treason and terrorism.

A key figure in these events is the alien sea creature known only as ‘Marina’. As you may know, viewers, Marina was one of the despotic Titan’s most favoured concubines. It is now believed that Titan used this siren to infiltrate Marineville security. This undersea Mata Hari wormed her way into the Stingray crew, and became a *very* close friend of WASP hero, Captain Troy Tempest.

For over a year now, Marina has been at liberty to relay our security secrets directly to Titan himself...

As viewers will know, Marina was last seen heading for the undersea city of Titanica, in a Pacifican submarine. Soon afterwards, Stingray and her crew were lost in action. Did the siren lure Tempest and his crew to their deaths?”

“He’s not dead...” Atlanta whispered, “He can’t be...”

“But there’s more...” Johnny Jackson continued gravely, “Marina had accomplices within the WASP. Commander Samuel Shore, head of the WASP, has committed as yet undisclosed acts of treason, and was placed under close arrest. Shore is now being held on the Prison Planet, Conva.

Shore’s daughter, Lieutenant Atlanta Shore, is widely believed to be the traitor, who, together with her undersea creature friends, stole the WASP’s Swordfish submarine — after placing coralamic bombs in the submarine pens.

Now Atlanta Shore is under lock and key — but beware Captain Jordan — Titan’s agents are deadly!”

“Atlanta? Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes Jacques. I’m sorry, I was worrying about poor Troy.”

Jordan switched off the television. "Atlanta, I am afraid there is nothing we can do for Troy, but believe me..."

The telephone began to ring.

Atlanta looked at the phone apprehensively. After exchanging a worried glance with Jordan, she gingerly picked it up. "Yes? Yes he's here Sergeant."

Atlanta offered the phone to Jordan

"It's the sergeant at the perimeter gate. He wants to speak to you sir."

Jordan nodded and took the receiver, "Captain Jordan here... Yes Sergeant. Send him right over." Jordan turned to Atlanta as he replaced the receiver. "We have a visitor. Space General Wilbur Zero of the World Space Patrol."

-----  
"Hello Atlanta," Zero smiled wearily, when Atlanta opened the door. "Sorry to drop in on you like this. I must speak with Captain Jordan urgently."

Atlanta returned the smile, "Hello Wilbur, it's been a long time. Please, come in, Captain Jordan is in the lounge."

"I'm sorry about your father. We're doing our best to get Sam freed. He has a lot of friends — some in high places."

Atlanta squeezed the General's arm as she escorted him into the lounge. "So I see... General."

"He also has a lot of enemies," Jordan said gravely, "also in 'igh places."

"Captain Jordan... Sorry to drop in on you like this; this is strictly unofficial."

"I'll get us all a coffee..." Atlanta told them as she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Captain," Zero said crisply, "I'll get right to the point. Will you support a move to have the World President removed from office?"

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There was a loud crash as something smashed on to the floor in the kitchen.  
“Er,” Zero added carefully, “Legally of course.”



## **Chapter 14**

### **Corruption At High Levels**

Titan gazed imperiously around the large coral table. Most of the undersea leaders had sent their representatives to Titanica. Titan had been gratified that Aphony, ruler of Pacifica, had chosen to come in person. Much as Titan despised Aphony, he sorely needed allies right now.

Titan raised a hand, "Silence!"

Everyone at the table stopped speaking. All eyes were now on the undisputed ruler of Titanica — perhaps the last hope of the undersea peoples.

"I have received interesting news concerning our enemies, the Terraineans. They fight amongst themselves. My surface agents inform me that the Terrainean government has become unstable, due of course to my own efforts on behalf of the undersea civilizations. Many of our enemies have been neutralized by their own kind. Stingray was destroyed by a Terrainean spacecraft. The accursed Troy Tempest is dead." Titan was pleased to see that Aphony nodded his head in agreement. "The Commander of the Terrainean submarine force has been incarcerated, along with his daughter. My agents report that they are to be executed..."

There were mutterings of approval and astonishment from around the table.

"As I speak," Titan continued, "one of my Surface Agents has informed me that the Terrainean President is planning an attack, on his own people. An attack which will be blamed on all those that dwell beneath the seas.

So be it. Let the fools destroy themselves and promote fear and distrust amongst their own people."

Titan stood up and raised a fist, “Shall we strike now? While the Terraineans are at their weakest?”

All eyes turned to Aphony, the peaceful leader of Pacifica.

Without hesitation, he nodded his head in agreement.

-----

“What?” Jordan asked incredulously. “Why? That is, on what grounds General?”

“The President is tearing up treaties that preserve international and interplanetary peace. He won’t listen to reason — either to the national leaders or the military.”

“And you ask for my support?”

“Yes Captain. If the world leaders push through a vote of no confidence, the President will certainly declare Martial Law; and that needs the support of the military.”

Jordan frowned. “I have reason to believe that Admiral Beatty was in some way implicated in the recent attack on Marineville. I have evidence that the attack was carried out by WIN agents. It seems to me that there is corruption at high levels.”

“What’s your evidence?” asked Zero.

“I have a witness... Lieutenant Shore tried to thwart the attack. Three government men tried to kill us both. They tried to stage a murder — with me as the victim and Atlanta as the killer — a phoney jail break — to eliminate both of us. Furthermore I have one of the men locked up in the cell block; the other two are dead.” Jordan placed two small cards on the coffee table. “These men carried their IdentICODES. I’ve ‘ad them checked, they were definitely government agents.”

Zero picked up the I.D. cards. “With friends like these...” he muttered glancing at the photographs inside. “Say, these two have clearance Alpha1...”

“Oui, General Zero, the World President’s personal bodyguard; responsible only to ‘im.”

“This could be all we need to make our move Captain,” Zero said quietly. “With your permission, we’ll leave immediately for Unity City — with that captured WIN agent. With your joint testimonies we’ll persuade the world leaders to convene an emergency meeting and register a vote of no confidence pending further investigation.”

“Certainly General, we can leave right away. I’ll have a jet standing by at the airstrip.”

“That jet of yours won’t be necessary Captain. Just arrange landing clearance and we can be on our way.”

Jordan used Atlanta’s telephone to advise the tracking station and alert security. “It is done General Zero. The prisoner is being brought over and you are clear to bring in your aircraft.”

Zero took out his personal communicator. “Okay Ross, bring her in, code one, one, five zero blue. Two passengers and one prisoner to pick up.”

Within seconds, a Fireball Junior spacecraft was descending to the Marineville complex.

“Okay... let’s get on our way!” Zero yelled above the sound of the retros.

WASP security guards handed the handcuffed prisoner over to Space Lieutenant Ken Ross.

“Okay Ross,” General Zero said briskly, “I’ll fly us to Unity City. Take the prisoner aft and ensure he doesn’t cause any trouble; and above all, make sure he stays alive.”

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As Ross headed for the rear section with Higgs, General Zero escorted his two guests through to the flight deck. He pointed to the co-pilot's chair, "Take a seat Atlanta, you'll enjoy the trip. Don't worry Captain Jordan, this flight will only take about ten minutes; with the artificial gravity you won't feel a thing."

Soon Fireball XL7 Junior was blasting away from Marineville and streaking into the clear morning sky.

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Somewhere in Unity City, a woman was speaking anxiously to Admiral Beatty over a scrambled communications channel, "We've lost all contact with our operatives at Marineville."

There was a pause, "Is that Shore woman still alive?"

"Last reports indicated that Lieutenant Shore had been released from her cell and was being debriefed by Captain Jordan."

"Jordan's alive?! Sam, we'll have to make our move now. Once Bandranaik declares Martial Law we'll control the law — in fact I'll be the law. I'll have all of those traitors executed; every last one of them."

## **Chapter 15**

### **Highjacked**

Atlanta Shore sat in the co-pilot's seat of the sleek XL7 Junior spacecraft as it sped through the stratosphere, far above the eastern United States. Captain Jordan was standing close behind her, his hands resting lightly on the back of her chair.

Space General Wilbur Zero glanced over at his two WASP passengers, "We'll soon be over the Caribbean; I'm taking her down. We should arrive in Unity City in about four minutes."

As the silver spacecraft descended through the cloud layer, the sparkling blue ocean suddenly came into view.

"Oh Jacques..." Atlanta sighed, "It looks so peaceful down there."

"What in space?!" Zero suddenly exclaimed as he stared at the central viewer, "I'm getting a radar warning... Something up there ahead of us, in that cloud bank..."

Atlanta leaned forward in her seat, staring up at the distant clouds in alarm, "Aircraft?"

"Well," General Zero snorted irritably as he adjusted the central viewer, "I sure don't think it's gonna be angels..."

On the screen, insect-like silhouettes were coming into sharp focus — jet fighters with characteristic down-swept wing tips, and up-swept tail planes.

"Vipers!" Atlanta exclaimed.

“Yeah, and they’re unmarked...” Zero observed darkly, as they all stared apprehensively at the black aircraft on the central viewer. “I don’t like the look of this!”

Captain Jordan gripped the back of Atlanta’s chair, “They’re carrying hydromic depth charges General; they must be World Navy planes.”

Zero switched on the radio, “This is Space General Zero of the World Space Patrol. Viper aircraft — identify yourselves.”

There was no response.

“Somehow,” Jordan said as he watched the sinister-looking aircraft on the viewer, “I don’t think they are going to be friends...”

Atlanta turned anxiously to Zero, “Can we outrun them?”

The General did not answer.

“Ross!” he barked into the intercom, “Brace for evasive manoeuvres! Break out the acceleration couches. This is gonna be rough...”

Zero jabbed buttons on his console, “Atlanta, let Jordan have your seat.”

Atlanta quickly released her safety belt and got to her feet.

Zero turned to look up at the Captain, “Sit down Jordan, and get Atlanta on your lap fast!”

Suddenly six of the fighters broke cover and hurtled down from the clouds on an intercept course, firing a spread of air to air missiles as they came.

“Here they come!” Jordan shouted as he grabbed Atlanta and hugged the startled girl to him.

“And here we go!” Zero exclaimed as he thrust the control yoke forward and sent the ship into a screaming power dive.

The blue Caribbean rushed up to meet them...

A dozen missiles exploded around XL7 Junior as it hit the water and plunged down into the depths. Zero hurriedly swung the spaceship onto a new heading as he checked his console, "So far so good!"

"They'll be getting a fix on our position," Jordan told him, "then they'll drop their hydromic depth charges."

"So we're getting out of here. Those Vipers are fast but they can't make a vertical climb..."

Atlanta watched in amazement as the sea ahead of them started to brighten. It took a moment for her to realize that they were now pointing directly upwards, towards the surface. The ship's artificial gravity insisted that 'down' was always towards the deck, whatever the ship's actual orientation might be.

"Ross? You all set for a high G blast-away?"

"All ready sir," came the reply from Junior's rear cabin where the XL7 skipper was guarding the captured government agent Higgs.

"Hold tight you two," Zero told Jordan and Atlanta, "the gravity compensators may not cushion all of the G forces."

Zero fired the main motors and Fireball Junior surged upward.

Atlanta found herself being pressed back into Jordan's lap as the ship continued to accelerate. There was a jolt as the spaceship shot into the air and continued to hurtle up into the sky.

Some of the startled Viper pilots managed to launch a few missiles, but there was not enough time for them to fire a second salvo.

"Full boost!" Zero warned as he fired the ship's boosters.

-----

At World Security Headquarters, Unity City, Admiral Beatty glowered at the nervous and perspiring naval officer who stood stiffly at attention in front of his desk.

"The fools! How long before they reach Unity City?"

"About five minutes sir. Should I inform the President, sir?"

"No! I'll inform the President myself."

Once the officer had gone, Beatty snatched up the telephone on his desk and quickly dialled a number.

-----

After making his phone call, Admiral Beatty carefully studied a computer schematic of the Earth. As the wire frame globe slowly rotated, various symbols glowed brightly, each depicting a ship or military base.

As Beatty keyed in information, different coloured arcs appeared on the globe, each representing a flight path down over the southern hemisphere. Finally the Admiral cleared the globe of all trajectories but one; a flight path arcing away from Unity City in Bermuda. He studied his wristwatch for a moment before shutting down the console.

Beatty pressed a button on his desk, "Send my car round immediately. The Duty Officer will accompany me."

Beatty pressed another button and a wall panel slid aside, revealing a safe. The safe door swung open as soon as Beatty keyed in a series of numbers and pressed his palm against the sensor. He removed a half dozen folders, glancing briefly at each one. Each bore the 'Top Secret' designation. Finally he scooped up a sheaf of papers. He closed the safe and began to walk back to his desk.

As he did so he let one of the sheets of paper flutter to the floor. He stood and regarded the fallen document for a moment before picking it up and continuing to his desk. He drew a cigarette lighter from his pocket and set

fire to the sheet of paper, being careful to blow out the flame before dropping the remains into a waste paper bin. The burnt fragment of paper still bore the official Presidential Seal.

Beatty put the remaining documents into a slim attaché case, grabbed a gun from a desk drawer and left his office.

-----

"Sir..." a young naval officer ventured, as he sat opposite Admiral Beatty in the plush hover-limousine, "I don't understand sir, you haven't ordered a plane, why are we going to the airport?"

"President's orders." Beatty told him. "When we arrive I want you to go up to the Admin Block..."

-----

Fireball XL7 Junior arrived at Unity City Airport without further incident and General Zero, Captain Jordan and Atlanta were met by General Rossiter and driven off to World Security Headquarters as soon as they disembarked.

Space Lieutenant Ross was relieved to be back at the controls of his own ship as he requested take off clearance for his return flight to Space City.

Twenty five minutes later Ross was growing increasingly impatient as he argued over the radio with Unity City Flight Control, "Well what's the delay? Space General Zero will have my guts for garters if he finds out this ship is still sitting on the tarmac. I should be back at Space City."

"Orders. Look Ross, don't ask me. I've just been told it's orders from on high."

"General Zero didn't tell me anything about this..."

"Listen buddy, your General Zero is a very small wheel here. You're in Unity City now."

As Ross flicked off the radio in disgust he saw an airport security vehicle heading his way, lights flashing. "This is Airport Security," a voice announced over the radio, "XL7, lower your boarding steps, we're coming aboard."

"Why? What's going on?" Ross demanded irritably.

"Don't ask questions spaceman, just get that gangway deployed at the double."

Ross reluctantly complied with the 'request', but he took the precaution of grabbing a coma ray pistol from a locker on his way to the rear of the ship.

The security vehicle drew up at the foot of Junior's steps and an armed guard quickly opened the rear door. A uniformed naval man and someone in a dark greatcoat stepped out and hurried up the steps and into Fireball Junior.

"What's this all about?" Ross asked, "This is my ship and I'm under direct orders from Space General Zero."

"I am also under direct orders Lieutenant," the man in the coat stated icily.

The three men walked into Junior's control cabin. Taking off his coat and tossing it over the back of the co-pilot's seat, the man glared at Ross, "Well, do you recognize me?"

Ross shrugged, "Yeah, you look a bit like that Beatty guy."

Beatty glanced over at his aide. The officer removed a document from his inside pocket and handed it to Ross.

"This is my authority Lieutenant. I'm taking command of this vessel."

"But..."

"Read it man. Look at the signature. Look at the seal. You are now under my orders. My presence on this craft is to remain secret. You will be given flight

clearance immediately." Beatty sat down in the co-pilot's seat, "Prepare for take-off. We're going to Space City."

-----

A visibly shocked Vice World President Vanessa Copeland sat at the head of a large table in a secure meeting room in World Security Headquarters, Unity City. She struggled to believe the disturbing reports she had just received from the senior officers that sat around the table with her.

"These are very serious allegations, Captain Jordan. We know your reputation, so we don't think that you make them lightly but..."

"I've always been loyal to the World President, but I swore my oath to the Service not to any one man and if that man is wrong, it is my duty to speak out."

"Very commendable Captain. And you, Miss Shore, where do you fit into all this?"

"I've been an officer in the WASP for eight years. I've always been loyal, as has my father..."

"We'll leave your father out of this for the moment Miss Shore."

Jordan interrupted, "That should be Lieutenant Shore, Madam Vice President"

Atlanta related her story about the kidnapping and attack on Marineville by government agents.

"Captain Jordan, do you believe this story?"

"I did not at first, but I do now. Corroboration will come from the government agent we have brought for interrogation."

"Commander, ah, General Zero, these are very serious allegations you have made."



"I'm no politician, Madam Vice President. I'm a simple soldier. I came up through the ranks. And I've served in a space war, I know what it's like. Most of you are too young to remember."

"But there's no threat to the Earth, surely?" Copeland queried.

"That was the story that was used to stop panic" responded General Rossiter who had arranged this secret meeting. "Governments have always manipulated publicity to suit themselves. My aim is to stop a war with the Undersea Peoples and to stop a space war. I want to stop one man wrecking something we've worked so hard for and so many people have died for."

-----

A worried looking grey-suited man hurried into Admiral Beatty's outer office. "I have to speak to Admiral Beatty..."

"I'm afraid he's not in." his secretary told him.

"Where is he?"

"I'm afraid he didn't tell me. He called for his car about twenty minutes ago..."

"I suppose he must be with the President. I'll come back later."

Another grey-suited man strode into the outer office.

"I have to speak with..."

"He's not in. He's with the President."

"But Operation Strike Fear has reached Phase Two. He said he wanted to be informed immediately..."

"I'll have to call the Presidential Palace and see if we can contact Admiral Beatty there. We can't afford for this to go wrong."

-----

Sometime after their meeting with the Vice President Captain Jordan and Atlanta Shore were sitting in a spacious lounge in the Officers Club — only a short walk away from World Security HQ. They were waiting for General Zero to inform them of what action would be taken against the WP following their damning reports.

Massive windows overlooked the nearby Unity City Harbour and Bermudan coastline. Along one wall hung paintings of historic and contemporary naval vessels.

"I love the sea Atlanta. Yes it's dangerous and it's wild, but it is my life. "

Atlanta put her head in her hands, "Oh Jacques, what can we do? I have to help my father..."

"Try to relax Atlanta. We are doing all we can."

"They don't believe us do they?"

"Committing treason is not something people do lightly, Atlanta. In my experience of politics there is always a lot of talking before anything is done."

Jordan got up and walked over to study one particular painting.

Atlanta joined him. "My ship, Atlanta. The WNS Atlantis."

"She certainly is a fine looking vessel Jacques."

"Have you been to Unity City before?"

"Not since I was around eight years old."

"Would you like me to show you the sights? And then perhaps we could go for a meal while we are waiting, I know some excellent restaurants."

"Oh Jacques, yes, that would be wonderful. But, look at me. We left Marineville in such a hurry I must look a real mess and I've nothing to wear I'm afraid."

"Then that is easily solved. We shall start with a shopping trip and I will buy you the clothes you would like to wear."

"Oh I couldn't have you do that... Could I?"

"Yes you could. And I would be delighted to share the day with you."

"OK Jacques. It's a deal. But I must ask you one thing first..."

"Ask away."

"When you came to Marineville before, you spoke with a much stronger accent..."

"Ah, yes. Well you see, as captain of a naval vessel I have to speak clearly to give orders and..."

"So, am I to assume you are giving me orders?"

"Well of course not Atlanta. I must confess to you that, well, I find that my French accent, er, attracts the ladies..."

"Ah, I see Jacques. And... Do you want to attract this particular lady?"

"I am enchanted by zis particular lady. Now, Atlanta, let me 'ow you say? Show you ze sights."

-----

Later that afternoon Rossiter and Zero were called back to World Security HQ and waited expectantly to hear the Vice President's decision.

"The agent didn't say very much," General Rossiter said quietly referring to the interrogation of WIN agent Higgs that he had just attended "but what he did say, together with what Jordan told us, is leading a trail directly to Beatty."

Zero nodded, "I guess Admiral Beatty will have a few tough questions to answer."

"Assuming he's found," Rossiter carefully lit a cigar, "It seems he's gone AWOL."

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"Smooth ride, Lieutenant," Admiral Beatty said approvingly. "I may order some of these for the Navy as run-about."

"Yes Admiral," Ross acknowledged tonelessly.

"You are an astronaut?"

"Yes sir."

"I gather these little run-about's can travel underwater. Is that right?"

"Yes Admiral."

"Is that just in theory? I mean I've seen the specs, but do you have any personal experience in taking these tubs underwater?"

"Yes Admiral. It's pretty routine." Ross checked his instruments, "We're nearing Space City Admiral," he announced with unmasked relief in his voice, "I'll radio for landing clearance."

"No, Lieutenant, you won't do that. We're not going to Space City. That was a necessary misdirection. You will in fact, continue to this position," Beatty handed Ross a slip of paper, "Have you sufficient fuel?"

"Yes sir."

"Inform me when we are near those co-ordinates. You'll be able to demonstrate this craft's underwater capabilities. I shall sleep now."

## **Chapter 16**

### **Risking Everything**

General Rossiter looked up as an aide beckoned. "Okay, Wilbur, guess this is it..." General Rossiter and General Zero followed the aide into a nearby office where the Vice President sat waiting for them.

She gestured for the two men to sit down in front of her desk.

"General Rossiter, I'm going to put my cards on the table. But first I need to know — have we got the backing of the Space Patrol?"

Rossiter glanced at Zero, "Yes, the Space Patrol is behind you. We have probably more at stake than the other services."

"General McCormack has pledged the support of the World Army Airforce."

Rossiter frowned, "What about Beatty? He's the President's man. Does that mean the World Navy is still out on a limb?"

"Talking to the senior officers of the World Navy, most would support us."

Rossiter leaned forward in his chair, "What about Beatty?"

The woman spread her hands, "We don't know. Rumour has it that he's on some mission for the President. But obviously, we can't ask the President. As it is we are taking a chance. We think we have identified and distracted most of the President's spies."

"I hope you've dealt with all of them... We are all risking everything here." said Rossiter

"I realize that. But we have to proceed as planned, and also try to find out what devilment the President and Beatty might have cooked up between them."

There was a knock at the door and an aide hurried into the office, "Madam Vice President, we are advised that there is a hostile Terror Fish fleet approaching Australia!"

"This doesn't change anything; but I must find out what the World Navy can do about this."

Rossiter and Zero exchanged a meaningful glance as they left the office.

"No Wilbur," Rossiter said firmly, "we can't have Fireball ships operating in Earth's atmosphere, it's against all the treaties and regulations."

"Even in an emergency?"

"Even in an emergency... Unless that is, the World President personally sanctions it. This is a job for the World Navy."

They left World Security HQ and headed for the nearby Officers Club where they would update Jordan and Atlanta.

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"Sir..." a junior officer called from her console, "I think you should see this..."

A young Space Patrol lieutenant strode over to look at the girl's monitor, "What the..?" He snapped on the radio without taking his eyes from the radar screen, "Perimeter Tracking here, we've got a blip on the scope and it looks like a Fireball Junior. We have nothing scheduled... Position nine, one, five, zero black. Course seven, one, five, zero green."

"Roger Tracking. That's XL7. We've been trying to reach them and they aren't answering." responded Captain Anderson.

"Wasn't that the ship the Commander, I mean the General, took?"

"Yeah, it sure was. Maintain tracking that craft. Notify any change in course and speed." ordered Anderson from where he sat at the main control desk in Zero's absence. He turned to look at Lieutenant Drake at the console opposite, "Keep trying to contact them Lieutenant"

"This is Space City Tower to XL7. Come in Lieutenant Ross... I don't get it sir. Their radio seems to be operating - they just aren't responding."

"Get me General Rossiter."

-----

The World President stood in his opulent lounge in the Presidential Palace, smoking a cigar and drinking a brandy. He smiled to himself as he surveyed the view from the window. A car had just arrived in the palace courtyard. He refilled his glass as a voice on an intercom announced his visitor.

A uniformed courier saluted and handed the President a folder bearing an embossed seal.

Once the man had left, the President tore off the seal and quickly inspected the contents of the folder. He switched on an intercom and called his personal assistant, "Alvarez."

A dark-suited man entered the lounge and waited silently for instructions.

"It's starting. Arrange to convene an emergency meeting of the World leaders and have my Announcement ready."

"Yes sir, "Alvarez acknowledged. "Sir, there is a problem."

The President raised an eyebrow, "A problem?"

"You've sent Admiral Beatty off on a secret mission."

The President remained impassive, "Have I?"

"Admiral Beatty was going to arrange the final details of operation Strike Fear sir. Whilst we are trying to follow the plan as far as we can without Admiral Beatty we aren't totally sure what needs to happen."

"I have sent Admiral Beatty on a secret mission. Did he tell you this?"

"Well, no sir... But... Roper observed that the Admiral called for a driver and went to the airport. The Admiral then commandeered a Fireball spacecraft."

"A Fireball craft was at the airport?"

"Yes sir. A Fireball Junior sir. General Zero arrived in it this morning."

"General Zero came here in a Fireball craft... And where is General Zero now?"

"He's at the Officer's Club with General Rossiter and the two WASP officers he arrived with sir." said Alvarez

"Have you got a man watching them?"

"Of course sir."

The President sipped his brandy thoughtfully, "Who is in charge of World Navy operations in Admiral Beatty's absence?"

"Admiral Bristol sir."

"Send him to me, now."

"Yes sir. Sir, the Vice President is obviously very concerned about the Terror Fish fleet approaching Australia..."

The President smiled, "Yes, she would be wouldn't she? She's a politician. Let her run round to the media and make it look like she's doing her bit for the folks back home. While she's doing that she's not causing me any trouble. Just make sure you have a final look at what she actually says before it goes out to the press. You know the drill."

"Yes sir."

"Is my press release ready?"

"Yes sir."

"You may go."

-----



As he flew XL7 Junior over the Pacific, Lieutenant Ross was anxiously listening to the incoming radio messages, "Space City to XL7, come in XL7... Lieutenant Ross answer at once!"

Admiral Beatty still sat in the co-pilot's seat, eyes closed and apparently asleep. The Admiral opened his eyes, "No, Lieutenant. I've ordered you not to respond to any radio messages. Surely we are nearing our destination by now?"

"We'll be there soon sir."

-----

After receiving the report from Space City about XL7 Junior, Rossiter and Zero left the Officers Club and returned to World Security Headquarters

A short time later Rossiter studied the electronic map of the southern hemisphere from his office desk with a worried look on his face. "This man of yours — Ross, how reliable is he?"

"He's one hundred percent loyal sir," Zero replied carefully.

"You do realise we're going to have to shoot him down."

"Let me try to reach him, sir. If I can be patched through to Space City I can contact the ship direct."

"Try. I'll let you try but the planes are going to be despatched anyway."

A junior officer worriedly addressed Rossiter, "The World Navy say they can't spare those planes General."

"What?!"

"There's some kind of flap on in the Eastern Pacific. The Navy are scrambling all aircraft with the kind of range we need to intercept XL7 sir."

Rossiter frowned, "This is starting to look like some kind of conspiracy..."

Meanwhile General Zero was calling XL7 on the radio and getting no response.

"I don't understand this. I'd never have thought it of Ross."

"Is it Ross? Could anyone else be flying that ship?"

"A Fireball Junior is very difficult to fly in atmosphere. They don't behave like aircraft. There aren't many prospective pilots who have the required reactions and abilities... I think it's most unlikely someone else is piloting that ship."

"Don't you have a robot that can fly one..."

"Yeah but it's a one off... It has problems."

"If they can build one robot..."

Zero resumed shouting at Ross.

-----

Captain Jordan and Atlanta Shore had decided to remain in the Officers Club Lounge while they waited for their return flight to Marineville to be arranged.

Atlanta Shore shook her head, "I wish poor Troy were here, he'd know what to do, I know he would. They shouldn't have imprisoned father. This would never have happened if he'd still been in command of the WASP."

Captain Jordan shrugged, "But Atlanta, I'm in charge of the WASP..."

"Well what are you doing? Why are you here? Why aren't you doing something?!"

Jordan sighed, "Atlanta, please. If I had my way, I'd be on my ship going to meet this threat."

Atlanta became calmer, "Jacques, what direction is this enemy fleet approaching from?"

"From map reference seven seven three Atlanta."

"But Titanica is nowhere near those co-ordinates Jacques."

"Well Atlanta, Titan is very devious..."

"But we don't think Terror Fish have that kind of range. They don't operate that far from Titanica. Not in any numbers. And why didn't any of our tracking stations pick them up?"

"That is a very good question. I shall have some hard questions for those tracking stations when I get back to Marineville."

"It doesn't make sense Jacques."

"Perhaps Titan has developed Terror Fish with longer ranges."

"But there are no deep undersea trenches in that area. How could they have eluded seven WASP tracking stations and five patrol areas between Titanica and Australia?"

"What are you saying Atlanta? Are you saying they are not Terror Fish?"

"I don't know... It just doesn't make sense. I wish father were here, he'd know what to do. Terror Fish normally lay in wait and ambush unwary craft. They don't go en masse like a fleet. Troy says they are very unwieldy, they don't steer well in shallow waters."

"How would Tempest know that?"

"He captured one once. We examined it."

"Atlanta... I do not know what to think. But you are right we should not just sit here. We will get over to the World Security building. If nothing else you can give them your expertise on Terror Fish."

"I've been thinking Jaques..."

"Oh?"

"You've been saying how you wanted to get back to your ship, the Atlantis, so you could tackle the Terror Fish threat."

"Yes?"

"This is a job for the WASP."

"But the World Navy..."

"The World Navy won't reach the area in time."

"What are you saying?"

"We could get at least one Stingray class vessel to the attack zone in a couple of hours, maybe less."

"What could one little WASP sub do to combat twenty or so Terror Fish?"

"I intend to find out, Captain Jordan. We can get Swordfish transported from Marineville to the South Pacific."

"But it would be futile."

"It's never futile to try to save lives Captain."

"But Atlanta, I would be sending men to certain death..."

"No you wouldn't. I intend to captain Swordfish. I'm the most senior qualified officer."

"Must I remind you Lieutenant — I am in command of the WASP."

"Of course Jacques. We'll need a fast heavy lifter; I'm sure I can persuade Wilbur to help us out..."

-----

The World President sat at his desk.

In front of him sat a half dozen men and women in business suits.

The World President studied the brief report that had just been handed to him and then tossed it to the side of his desk,

---

"I'm really disappointed in General Zero. Well, he can answer the world leaders when they want to know why a fully armed WSP spacecraft is running amok in Earth atmosphere. If nothing else it'll distract the members of the World Council from my upcoming announcement — and point out to General Zero that he shouldn't be trying to play politics. He can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Nevertheless, I don't believe I can afford to wait for the actual attack on Australia. I smell a plot. I shall forestall it. Have your forces in place. Have that old fool McCormack attend me. I intend to make my Announcement flanked by the head of the World Army Airforce and the acting head of the World Navy."

-----

"Freighter SF7 to Space City, request landing clearance."

"Space City to SF7, do not land, repeat do not land. Proceed directly to WASP HQ Marineville. You are to make all possible speed."

-----

Ross turned to Admiral Beatty, "We have reached the co-ordinates you gave me sir."

"Beatty nodded. "Take us down into the water Lieutenant, heading three, one, five, zero green, depth sixty feet."

"Yes sir."

## **Chapter 17**

### **Collaboration in the Deep**

Space Freighter SF7 had collected Swordfish from Marineville and then picked up Atlanta from Unity City as ordered. SF7 had then dropped the supersub and her crew off at the WASP base in Brisbane, Australia for pre-launch checks before returning to Space City over an hour ago.

Atlanta Shore now sat at the controls of the supersub with Lieutenant John Fisher who had volunteered to be her co-pilot.

Was she ready for this mission?

"Tower to Swordfish. Please report situation." came the voice of Relief Controller Lieutenant Aston over the radio from Marineville.

"Swordfish to Tower. We are ready for immediate launch." replied Atlanta

"Good luck Lieutenant. The navy is on its way but..."

"I understand the situation sir. The WASP have been up against tougher odds."

"Very good. Proceed with orders..."

"P.W.O.R."

Atlanta forced herself to keep her voice calm as she began her first, and possibly her last undersea mission. "Rear hydroplanes to thirty degrees. Ahead rate two. Flood tanks one and two."

"Aye sir," Lieutenant Fisher acknowledged a little nervously...

"Green twenty," Atlanta ordered crisply. "Keep a sharp look out with those hydrophones..."

-----

Lieutenant Ross piloted Fireball Junior down into an undersea canyon. Rocky cliffs loomed up on either side of the spacecraft as it moved slowly through the murky depths.

Admiral Beatty was flicking the radio switches methodically. He seemed to be transmitting some kind of coded message. Ross couldn't make it out and by now he knew better than to ask questions. He wasn't about to get any answers from the Admiral.

In a small, dark under sea control-room, lights began to flicker on. Consoles hummed into life as automated systems activated. On a video monitor an image of a rocky cavern was displayed. Sea water rapidly began to fill the cave.

-----

Fireball Junior entered the cavern and water tight doors closed behind it. Ross brought his craft to rest on the sandy floor of the small cave as instructed. The water level began dropping rapidly.

Ross wasn't looking at the dropping water level, he was looking down the barrel of a gun.

"No Lieutenant," Beatty told him coldly, "you aren't going anywhere... Ever!"

-----

"Swordfish approaching designated area sir. Still no Terror Fish sightings reported by our tracking stations." reported Lieutenant Aston, standing in front of the Marineville Control Room Videophone.

"And the World Navy task force?" responded Captain Jordan over the scrambled line from Unity City Airport, where he was waiting for his flight back to Marineville

"Task Force at map reference five one two, one one eight sir."

"They've made good time. It'll still be a couple of hours before they reach the area..."

"Sir, Neptune has launched her long range aircraft in case they can pick anything up from the air."

"Good. Exactly what I would have done."

-----

The Vice President took a deep breath and activated her video phone. The video screen blurred briefly and then the word 'Scrambled' appeared in the top left corner, above the images of two uniformed men.

"General McCormack here Ma'am."

"Admiral Bristol reporting Ma'am".

"Gentlemen, I must stress this Skyray conference call is for your eyes and ears only. In fact, it is not taking place at all. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Understood sir."

"Very well. The next voice you hear will be that of a gentleman known to us all only as 'S'."

Another image appeared on the shared Skyray screens, an image that simply displayed the words 'Sound only selected'.

"Madam Vice President, gentlemen. I will be brief. I will simply give you my unofficial advice and support. As you are aware, the Universal Secret Service cannot and will never, interfere in matters of the Earth's internal security. After the creation of the World Intelligence Network, such matters became solely their responsibility. However, there is inevitably a degree of crossover between our two agencies. Up until a few years ago, exchange of



information between the USS and WIN was effective and relatively seamless. However, over the last three years relationships between the USS and WIN have deteriorated, becoming somewhat strained. Whilst investigating a conspiracy to destroy the entire Solar System, my agents also uncovered some disturbing things taking place within the World Government, but since this is outside of our sphere of operations, we naturally informed WIN. No action appears to have been taken. The situation is now critical. We, unofficially, believe that WIN is seriously compromised at a very high level."

S paused to clear his throat, "More importantly and also unofficially, we believe the Earth now has a rogue President acting to the detriment of the planet's population. You must collectively act before it is too late."

-----

A grey suited man sat at a glass and chrome desk in an expensively appointed office. He spoke urgently on the phone to his WIN section head. "I don't like it. The Boss and the Admiral might have cooked up something between them but I'm not sure the Boss really knows what's going on. I think it might be time to start doing some damage control. Yes... I agree... Yes I've got the combination codes for the safe... Oh, she's still running around like a headless chicken about this attack on Australia. She won't get in my way." He put the phone down.

Another phone rang. He picked it up and spoke to Alvarez, the President's PA.

"No sir, no word yet from Admiral Beatty. The attack's continuing as planned. We are doing what we can to follow the plan. The operatives all have their instructions anyway".

-----

"I don't understand it!" General Zero exclaimed. "A Fireball Junior can't just disappear..."

---

“Has it been shot down?” asked Rossiter

“No. The planes are still searching. They haven’t spotted the Terror Fish or XL7 Junior and they are supposedly in the same area.”

“Perhaps the President is right. Your spacecraft has been captured by the undersea people.”

-----

Lieutenant Ross struggled in vain to free himself. He had been gagged with a bandage and secured to one of the emergency couches in Junior’s jetmobile bay.

Beatty had donned a World Space Patrol wetsuit and was now in the undersea control room. He had transferred the paperwork he had brought with him into a stubby torpedo-shaped watertight case.

Now Beatty was carefully checking information on the various consoles. He turned and opened a door to a large storage area. There were racks of packing cases from floor to ceiling. Beatty walked over to some crates labelled ‘Danger — High Explosives’. Opening the crate, he selected a box with a particular code number.

He quickly checked the contents. They were oddly shaped organic looking objects. He walked back out to the cave where Fireball Junior had been left. With only a glance at the spacecraft Beatty made his way to the closed outer door and began carefully attaching the sticky explosive material around the edges. Once he was finished, he inserted a small detonator and headed swiftly back to the control room.

Back in the control room, Admiral Beatty activated a console which displayed maps of the seabed. He began studying the maps and charts carefully.

A short while later the Admiral was sitting at the controls of a small two-person submarine. It was a smooth silver-grey, cylindrical hulled sub with

a bubble canopy. In the seat behind Beatty was the watertight document case.

He ran through pre-launch checks. Plugged into the console was a small radio device.

-----

Now back at the Marineville Control Tower, Captain Jaques Jordan was staring incredulously at the situation reports. "This doesn't make any sense! All of the reconnaissance flights have drawn a blank. There's no sign of any Terror Fish activity. No wake, no track of any Terror Fish. The Navy reported clearly identified tracking but now there's just no trace. Get me Swordfish, Lieutenant."

"Atlanta, the aerial search has found nothing. It's entirely up to you now."

At the controls of Swordfish, Atlanta glanced over at Fisher. He shook his head, "Nothing yet sir."

"I understand sir. We are entering area three one five now. No sign of anything unusual." said Atlanta

"Are you absolutely certain?" queried Jordan

Atlanta exchanged another glance with Fisher, "Absolutely certain sir. We know what Terror Fish sound like."

"Even if the World Navy don't..." Fisher muttered.

"Very well. Initiate search pattern. From now on maintain radio silence. You're on your own now Swordfish. Good luck."

-----

Admiral Beatty was steering his mini-sub away from the under-sea installation. After only a few minutes the small craft was rocked by an

explosion. Smiling to himself with satisfaction, he adjusted the controls and began to accelerate.

Rocks fell around Fireball Junior, some bouncing off the hull as water began to flood into the cavern.

In the jetmobile bay, Ross was struggling to get his hands free from the restraining straps that held him down.

He managed to turn and began to use his belt buckle to saw through a strap.

Water was gushing into the control room. Several of the control panels began to short circuit and flames erupted as an electrical fire started. The flames illuminated the open doorway to the storage area and the crates labelled 'High explosives'.

Lieutenant Ross was wishing his belt buckle was just a little bit sharper as he vainly struggled to free himself. From the sound of the explosions, the whole undersea base was about to blow up. The ship rocked again as more debris fell from the roof of the cavern.

"No good..." He told himself, "Guess this is it."

"Can I assist you Lieutenant?"

Ross froze. It didn't sound like Beatty. He turned his head. A robed green skinned figure stood in the doorway.

"You bet" Ross managed to call out.

The man stepped forward, producing a long knife from under his robes. "Your friend left in a hurry." the man said as he expertly sliced through the security restraining straps.

"No friend of mine," Ross sat up rubbing his arms and wrists, "We have to get out of here fast, the whole place is going up."

"Oh, there's no hurry Terrainean. I took the liberty of disconnecting the remaining explosives. Otherwise I'm afraid we would not be having this little talk."

"You are one of those undersea people aren't you?"

"Yes, I am one of those undersea people. And from your uniform I would say that you are one of those 'spacemen', correct?"

"Yeah," Ross said as he got a little unsteadily to his feet, "Space Lieutenant Ross, World Space Patrol at your service. But what are you doing here? Not that I'm complaining."

"Oh, I was just passing by and was curious about this undersea installation. It's all wired up for self-destruction."

"Can't help you there friend. All I know is that the admiral brought me here at gunpoint and then tried to blow me to bits."

"Yes, I observed your Admiral Beatty. He left in something of a hurry in one of the Piranha craft..."

"Piranha?"

"Your, ahem, the World Navy's high speed prototype submarines. Eight others left a few hours ago. What is their plan Lieutenant?"

Ross was starting to feel more than a little uneasy about his new companion. For one thing, the man was still holding his knife.

"I don't know yet, but I guess it's my job to find out, otherwise my boss is gonna feed me to the space-sharks! Will you help me?"

X2-Zero considered the situation thoughtfully, "Yes... Yes I believe we may help each other... We seem to find ourselves in very similar positions..."

To Ross's relief, the man put his knife away.

Ross led the way down Junior's boarding ramp. "So, what do you know about these Piranha subs?"

---

"High speed, two person prototypes. Prone to explode after thirty marine minutes or so if they maintain rate six."

"Not a lot of use then."

X2-Zero shook his head, "another failed Terrainean project."

From the way he spoke the word 'Terrainean', Ross got the strong impression that his rescuer was not a big admirer of humans. Right now, Ross was not a big fan of Admiral Beatty. What had the man been up to? Aside from attempted murder that is.

Ross could see that water was still pouring into the cavern and it was now almost up to waist height.

Telling X2-Zero to wait for him he ran back up the boarding ramp and quickly donned a WSP wet suit and aqualung.

Hoping his coma ray gun was water proof Ross hurried back down the ramp to join his rescuer

The sea water was now at chest level as Ross closed Fireball Junior's boarding ramp and then half swam over to the control room where X2-Zero was already looking over what remained of the control panels.

They continued to short circuit and burst into flames but the ever rising water was now dousing the inferno.

The two men did not touch the instrument panels for fear of electrocution but X2-Zero thought he recognized the function of one high level monitor that was still operating above the water level.

"This screen is recording a countdown if I am not mistaken. You Terraineans know that land mass shown beneath the countdown as Australia" said X2-Zero ominously.

"What are you suggesting?" asked Ross

“When I found this under sea base I also found missile silos nearby” said the Surface Agent.

Ross looked over to the far wall of the now nearly flooded control room and saw a panoramic window looking out over a hangar area where what appeared to be a dozen Titan Terror Fish were birthed.

X2-Zero swam over to the window and looked down in astonishment.

He could not believe his eyes

Titan would not be working with the Terraineans - or would he?

X2-Zero suddenly realized there was something odd about the Mechanical Fish he was looking at. Then it struck him like a hammer blow. They were World Navy Piranha two man submarines camouflaged to look like Titan’s Terror Fish.

Someone must be trying to blame Titan for the pending missile attack on...on where?? The monitor suggested Australia.

It was the nearest major land mass. Someone was trying to start a war between the undersea races and the Terrainians.

The Surface Agent was at a loss to know what to do next. He began to panic.

Lieutenant Ross swam over to X2-Zero.

He could no longer speak to the fish man as the control room was by now completely flooded.

Ross grabbed the Surface Agent’s arm and pointed towards the overhead monitor showing the countdown and then swam back towards the cavern where Fireball Junior sat waiting for him.

He turned and gestured for X2-Zero to follow him as he left the control room and headed for his ship.

X2-Zero joined Ross in Junior’s rear airlock.

Minutes later both men were in the control cabin still dripping and leaving pools of water everywhere.

“We’ve got to blast our way out of here.” said Ross as he sat down in the pilot’s seat and powered up Fireball Junior’s motors

Junior rose from the cavern floor and turned to face the wrecked entrance doors.

Hoping that he could blow the doors clear without collapsing the entire cavern Ross fired two nose cone missiles.

The cavern shook with violent underwater explosions as Ross operated Junior’s boosters and the WSP craft shot out into the open ocean miraculously still in one piece.

X2-Zero sat in the co-pilot’s chair with a terrified look upon his green face

“Show me where those missile silos are” said Ross with a determined look upon his face. “We’ve gotta stop the missiles being launched”

“If you will allow me to swim back to my craft then you can follow me to the missile silos,” said X2-Zero.

“Just point me in the right direction” said Ross “We don’t know how much time we’ve got”

“My craft is armed. I can help you destroy the silos,” insisted the Surface Agent.

Ross accepted the logic in X2-Zero’s argument realizing he could only use nose cone missiles while under water — and he only had four remaining in Fireball Junior’s arms magazine.

X2-Zero directed Ross to where he had left his small one man submarine resting on the seabed nearby.



The Surface Agent left XL7 Junior by the rear airlock and swam across to his craft.

Minutes later Ross was following X2-Zero's shark shaped submarine along the undersea canyon.

Less than half a mile from the base the canyon opened out into a circular plateau and Ross could see six missile silos on the seabed below...all with their blast doors open.

Ross quickly scanned the silos and detected six missiles armed with coralamic warheads.

Suddenly power levels began to rise and the missile in the nearest silo began to launch...

The missile left its silo on a tail of super-heated gases and gradually gained speed as it headed up towards the surface of the ocean on its mission of destruction.

Ross had no choice but to follow it. His only hope of destroying it was with interceptors once they broke the ocean's surface.

The coralamic missile shot up into the atmosphere with XL7 Junior close on its tail.

Once the missile had left the ocean depths it began to climb at ever increasing speed as it headed up towards the stratosphere before locking onto its pre-set Australian target.

Ross knew that his timing had to be perfect when he fired his interceptors at the missile. If he was too close he would be caught in the blast — and he wanted to destroy it as high in the stratosphere as possible to limit the effect of the nuclear fallout on the ocean below.

It was now or never. Ross could see the missile had reached its apogee. Two interceptor missiles shot away from Fireball Junior and found their target in a flash of deadly blinding energy on the edge of space.

---

The Space Lieutenant was sweating profusely as he threw XL7 Junior into a dive and headed back towards the undersea missile silos on the floor of the Pacific Ocean below. If only he could destroy the silos before any more missiles were launched.

Fireball Junior dived into the Pacific Ocean once more. Ross was beginning to feel more like an Aquanaut than an Astronaut as he powered his small craft back towards the missile silos. What could he do to stop the remaining missiles launching? If he fired his nose cone missiles at the silos would that stop them or create even more destruction than he was trying to prevent?

He soon arrived back at the plateau where the silos were located and could see X2-Zero's sub lying on the sea bed with its top hatch open.

He then spotted the Surface Agent swimming back towards his fish shaped craft with what looked like a large pair of heavy duty wire cutters held in his hands.

Ross scanned the silos with Junior's instruments and to his amazement found that power levels in all the silos was now at zero. The five remaining missiles were still in situ but now completely deactivated.

X2-Zero waived at Ross as he entered his craft and closed the hatch behind him.

Ross settled XL7 Junior down on the ocean floor next to the Surface Agent's sub. Suddenly the silence of the control cabin was broken by X2-Zero's voice coming loud and clear over the radio transceiver in the console beside his pilot seat.

"I have cut all of the intersite cables leading to the silos from the base" said the Surface Agent, sounding very pleased with himself. "No more power to launch the remaining missiles. I hope you destroyed the one that was launched?"

“Yes I did” said Ross “How did you find the cables? They would have been buried deep and shielded. My scanners would have had difficulty detecting them. And how do you know the frequency of my ship’s radio?”

“Do not assume my craft is inferior to yours Terrainean” snapped the Surface Agent. “Now that the danger is over I must leave you and report this incident to Titan at once”

“And I must return to Space City” said Ross into the transceiver. “Thank you for your help. What’s your name by the way?”

X2-Zero did not reply. His fish like craft was already moving away from the WSP ship with ever increasing speed and was soon out of site in the murky depths of the Pacific.

The XL7 skipper powered up Fireball Junior’s motors and headed for the surface on the first leg of his journey back home to Space City.

Had he got a story to tell General Zero.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Act Swiftly Or Die**

Titan stood beside one of the panoramic windows in the throne room of his undersea palace, gazing out into the deeps of the Pacific Ocean. He felt consumed with a cold rage. He now had proof that the Terrainean World Government were planning to start a war against all of the undersea races so they could invade and colonize the ocean floors.

Many underwater leaders had rallied to his call for an alliance against the surface world but even their combined forces would not be strong enough to repel the aggressors. It was all far too late for that now.

He should have seen this coming from the day the accursed World Aquanaut Security Patrol had first discovered the existence of his people.

If he had acted more swiftly and built strong undersea alliances he could have developed more powerful weapons that would have deterred the Terraineans from ever planning to live in his domain

Was it his fault that mighty Teufel had turned his face away from him?

He would find some way to make the Terraineans pay dearly for this. Their eventual victory would not be an easy one

Titan walked over to the Shrine of Teufel that was located next to his raised coral throne. He knelt down in front of its centre-piece; the circular viewport into the Fish God's Sacred Aquarium which was currently devoid of life.

"Oh Mighty Teufel. Why have you forsaken me and my people in our time of greatest need?" called the ruler of Titanica almost pitifully as he peered into the empty viewport.

It had been four days since Teufel had last shown itself to Titan even though the ruler of Titanica had called for his advice every day.

Fifteen marine minutes passed and Titan was about to stand up and walk back to his throne when the Great Sea God suddenly appeared filling the viewport with its great green bulk.

"Instruct me Mighty Teufel. How can I stop the accursed Terrainean forces from invading my...our oceans?"

Teufel's large eyes held the undersea monarch in a baleful glare. Titan felt his senses failing but he was locked in his kneeling position by that dreadful stare. Suddenly a beam of intense white light sprang from the Fish God's mouth and enveloped Titan.

Slowly Titan's senses returned to him and he rose to his feet.

Teufel was gone from the viewport.

How long had he been in communion with the Fish God?

It could have only been marine minutes but his mind was so full of unbelievably terrifying images and information that he almost blacked out again.

Titan only just managed to reach his throne and sit down before his legs lost their power to support him. His whole body shook with terror.

If the thoughts that Teufel had implanted in his mind were true then a war with the surface world was the least of his worries.

He would have to contact Marineville and ask for the Terraineans help.

What else could he do?

-----

"We have a radio call sir, it's coming from Titanica sir." Reported Lieutenant Aston

"Titanica? We have no subs in that area yet..." said Jordan

"Sir, the man claims to be Titan, he's the... the... "

"I may be a Navy man but I know who Titan is Lieutenant. What does he want? Let me guess, surrender or he attacks Australia."

"He didn't say sir, he demands to speak with you sir."

"Oh, he does, does he? In that case Lieutenant, tell Titan I'll speak to him when I have the time."

"Sir? I... That is..."

"Never mind, I'll be right over."

"This is Captain Jordan, Commander of the WASP. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"This gives me no pleasure Terrainean. I am Titan, ruler of the mighty city of Titanica. You will heed my words or suffer consequences..."

Jordan knew when he was being menaced. "Your attack will fail. We are intercepting your mechanical fish, and then I will personally see to it that you will definitely suffer consequences."

"Your pitiful attempt at implicating the undersea peoples in a false attack has failed. My surface agent has destroyed your missile base. Your death and the death of all Terraineans comes not from Titanica, but from the stars. The sun will become as ice and the whole world will perish."

"What kind of threat is that?"

"I make no threat! I have seen this. Many craft from a distant star. The end is coming."

"Which star? What craft?"

"The star where your submarine vessel, Stingray, is located. As for the craft, you have already seen one, but these are large, much larger. This audience is at an end. Act swiftly Terrainean or die... We will all die."

"He's closed the channel sir." said Aston

"Yes, I noticed. I noticed something else too." said Jordan

"Sir?"

"He sounded frightened."

-----

Captain Tempest opened his eyes abruptly and found that he was staring up into a clear turquoise sky. A woman's voice was calling his name; at least he thought it might be his name.

"Captain Tempest? Are you all right?"

Troy struggled to focus his eyes and his mind. A blonde haired girl seemed to be standing a few feet away. She appeared to be wearing shapeless light grey overalls; and a very worried expression.

Troy sat up slowly and found that he was on a beach. The sand felt warm against his bare feet, and he could hear the sounds of the sea. He seemed to be wearing the same kind of overalls as the girl. The colours around him seemed strange, as if everything had a slight greenish hue. He rubbed his eyes, trying hard to remember something. Then his memory suddenly came flooding back to him. He remembered being betrayed.

He got unsteadily to his feet, ignoring the hand that Doctor Venus was holding out to him.

"Where is Marina?" he demanded.

A hand gently touched Troy's shoulder causing him to swing around sharply.

"Marina!" he exclaimed.

“Skipper!” Phones called as he ran across the beach to join them.

“Say, are you okay? We were real worried.”

Troy glared angrily, “Worried? What’s this all about? Why did you knock me out?”

“Simmer down Troy... You must have had a bad dream.”

Troy was bracing himself for a fight, “You fired a gas gun at me Phones — and just before I went under I saw Venus slug Marina with a gun.”

Marina nodded. She took Troy’s arm, plainly frightened and confused.

Doctor Venus spoke matter of factly, “You were hallucinating Captain. I would do no such thing. I’m afraid you passed out during our tests.”

She advanced on Marina, but the girl backed away. “I won’t hurt you. I’m a doctor,” Venus said with concern in her voice.

“Back off ‘Doctor’,” Troy said coldly, “I don’t know what goes on here; but right now I don’t trust you or Phones.”

“That’s crazy talk Troy,” Phones said worriedly. “We’re all on the same side.”

Troy stood his ground, his hands balled into fists, “I want some answers. Where are we? Why are we all dressed like this?”

Suddenly Troy felt a slight dizziness, causing him to clutch at his head in confusion. The strange feeling passed and Troy looked embarrassed, “Gee Phones... Doctor Venus... I’m really sorry. Don’t know what came over me.”

“That’s okay Skipper,” Phones smiled, patting Troy on the shoulder.

“Please don’t worry Captain,” Venus said sweetly. “Now, we must get on with our work — if you are quite well now.”

“Yeah... I feel fine now,” Troy grinned. “Let’s get back to work folks.”



Marina was alarmed by the sudden turn of events and began tugging at Troy's sleeve. He gently pushed her hand away, "No time for that now Marina — duty calls. We can have some fun later."

"Say," Phones smiled, pointing towards the sea, "here comes Atlanta."

Marina was shocked to see an alien Aquaphibian emerging from the water. It lumbered slowly towards them, studying the small group malevolently.

"Hi Atlanta honey," Troy called. "We'll see you tonight after we're through with the experiments."

For a moment Marina hesitated, then she smiled and waved to the ugly fish-man. It turned and headed back to the sea.

"Nice how you girls get on so well," Phones grinned amiably as they began walking along the beach together.

-----

Captain Jordan called General Zero on a scrambled telephone link and told his story.

"Has your submarine engaged the enemy yet?"

"Not to my knowledge General. Swordfish was ordered to maintain radio silence. The element of surprise is all that Swordfish has against maybe a dozen mechanical fish. The Navy is still more than an hour away..."

"So what of Titan's story that one of his agents destroyed a missile base?"

"Unable to verify yet General, I called you immediately."

-----

"Ross to Space City... This is Fireball XL7 calling Space City..."

"Where in space have you been Lieutenant?" responded Zero

"I was hijacked sir. But listen Commander, er General, I've just destroyed a missile site under the ocean."

"You did what?"

"The missiles were being launched at Australia sir!"

"Get XL7 back here right now Ross! You have a lot of explaining to do!"

A short while later XL7 Junior, along with a fighter escort, arrived at Space City.

Ross was more than a little surprised when he was taken into custody by security guards as soon as he left his ship.

After a lot of explanations and cross questioning Ross was ordered to prepare Fireball XL7 for launch.

-----

Zero informed General Rossiter about Beatty, using a scrambled video link to World Security HQ, Unity City.

"So Wilbur, it was a staged attack as we suspected. I'll have to inform Admiral Bristol and General McCormack. Looks like the chickens are coming home to roost..."

Zero frowned, "I'm guessing one particular chicken is going to be heading out of the Solar System."

"My advice is let him. You don't have the resources to track him down and deal with an attack on our entire system."

Zero nodded, "Yeah, I guess it would be a job for the World Intelligence Network, but they are up to their necks in this whole business."

"Leave Beatty to me Wilbur," Rossiter said, "You have more important things to do."

-----

Marina watched in astonishment as Troy, Phones and Doctor Venus continued to act as if everything was normal; as if they were back at Marineville, and not on some strange alien world.

"Say Troy, let's take the girls to the Blue Lagoon tonight."

Troy smiled, "Great idea Phones. Doctor Venus, would you like to join us?"

Marina edged away as the conversation continued. She had to do something — but what? She looked at the various pieces of equipment laid out around them. Some looked familiar, she'd seen them at the hospital. Other items looked alien and had a fluid, melted appearance. The landscape looked equally alien somehow.

Several hideous looking Aquaphibians walked by, but only glanced briefly in her direction. They were heading towards the sea.

Marina's instincts told her to head for the sea too.

-----

Admiral Beatty, now dressed as a civilian, boarded the Universal Spaceways express ship SS Ventura, bound for Mars.

He found his window seat and sat down, his briefcase clutched firmly in his hands.

As the cabin began to fill up another passenger sat down beside the Admiral, "You'll find there's a locker under the seat." said the dark haired, middle aged man beside him.

"Oh, thank you."

"Once we take off they like everything stowed in case there's a glitch in the artificial gravity."

"Is there likely to be?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to worry you. No, never known anything like that to happen. It's just one of those safety things. Like the oxygen pill dispenser that'll open up in the seat back if we lose air. Or there's the..."

"Yes, yes. I get it." Very reluctantly, Beatty stowed his case in the seat locker.

"This your first time away from Earth?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I just wondered if you'd decided to try something new."

"Do I know you?" Beatty asked a little testily.

The man smiled agreeably, "I don't think so... Unless you happen to be in the toy business."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"That's kind of my line of work."

"It is?"

"Yes," the man tapped his own chrome coloured metallic briefcase, "I'm a toy salesman."

Beatty stared out of the window, "Fascinating I'm sure."

"Well," the man said as he reached down to put his own case in the locker, "I get to travel a lot. Usually I take the overnight ferry to Mars, but once in a while I like to fly on the express, get to Mars in only four hours."

-----

The World President looked up to see his PA enter the office.

"Mr President, we have been unable to contact Admiral Beatty," said Alvarez.

"Where in blazes is he?"

"Mr President, we have reason to believe he has left Earth."

"Without my authorisation? Do you have reason to believe why?"

"Mr President, please understand this is only conjectural. I have no substantive evidence to support our suppositional..."

"Stop blathering Alvarez! I want a straight answer. What in space is going on?"

"I fear The Great Plan has failed. He has fled, Mr President."

"Failed? What do you mean failed? I am on the verge of total global domination!"

"The attempt to liquidate Shore's daughter failed. Two agents dead, one captured. Captain Jordan was a witness. General Zero is backing them..."

"Why haven't you dealt with them?"

"We understood that Admiral Beatty was going to brief you..."

"I see. Can't we just eliminate the agent? An accident or something?"

"An attempt to obviate the threat was made when the, er, plot, was discovered, Mr President. It failed. They are in Unity City. We believe there have already been private discussions with the Vice President."

"Traitors spreading their lies! This sounds like an attempted coup. Alvarez, convene an emergency meeting of my advisors. I have to move swiftly — and decisively!"

-----

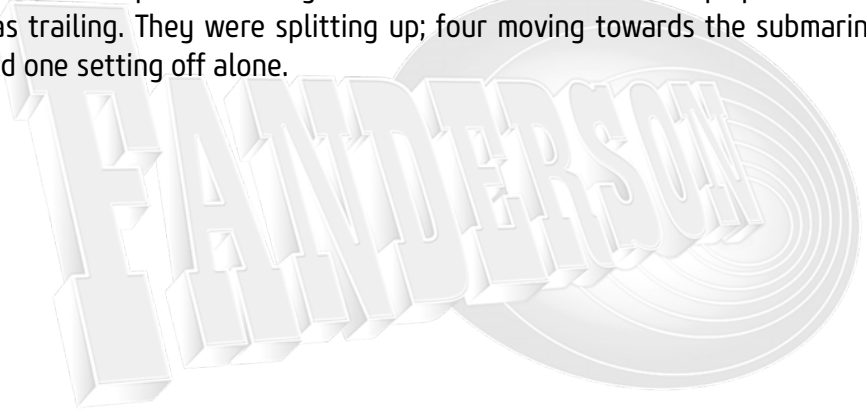
In the alien waters of a far off world, Marina was following the small group of Aquaphibians. She had been swimming for over an hour now and was convinced that she was no longer on Earth. She had found the salt water of this sea was strangely invigorating. It seemed to the girl that this ocean was far cleaner than the oceans of Earth, far richer in oxygen. Gradually

though she was noticing a change, there was a familiar oily metallic tang to the water.

Marina continued to pursue her quarry down towards the seabed. Her keen eyes began to make out dim shapes below her, many large structures, like a vast unlit underwater city stretching out into the distance.

As she drew closer she saw that the structures were submarines, similar to the one which had engulfed her terror fish, but much larger. She realized they must also be space ships if she was now on another world.

For a moment Marina thought she'd spotted a familiar shape, but movements up ahead brought her attention back to the Aquaphibians she was trailing. They were splitting up; four moving towards the submarines and one setting off alone.



## **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.”

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## **Chapter 20**

### **Baptism of Fire**

Marina emerged from the undersea canyon in a state of exhaustion. She swam slowly over to some rocks by the canyon's edge, crawled between them, and lay down to rest. Where could she go? She was certain to be captured if she returned to Troy and the others. As she lay concealed in the rocks her mind went over the events in the cave. She was certain that whatever lurked there was controlling the Aquaphibians, and possibly her friends also.

Was it another Teufel? Or had Teufel too journeyed to this planet? She knew so little about Titan's strange ally. She knew that Titan had a deep respect for Teufel and seemed to regard the fish creature as a mentor.

Marina tried again to understand the thoughts that she'd felt in the cave. Embedded in the images there had been emotions and feelings. A bizarre mix of intense heat and then intense cold. A feeling of life and then a feeling of lifelessness. A feeling of something very cold, so cold it would cool the sun itself. Marina shivered. She had sensed a feeling of death mingled with satisfaction. A sense of great power; and great evil. Then there had been another feeling. A discord, something out of place... and then she'd seen her own image in the mind of the cave creature. She knew she meant more than an irritation to the telepath, she was a threat. That thought gave Marina new hope. There was something she could accomplish to challenge the creature's power; but what? She was alone on a world that was not her own, but she refused to feel despair and instead clung to hope.

Marina had to move on. She dared not rest any longer, pursuit could not be far behind. She slowly edged her way out of the craggy outcropping, but to her horror, came face to face with a huge grotesque fish.

Marina ducked back behind the rocks, and hid herself, hardly daring to breathe. Nothing happened. She could feel no telepathic probings. Cautiously, she peered out from her hiding place. This time she saw the fish for what it really was; one of Titan's Mechanical Fish, lying silently on the sea floor. She'd glimpsed it before from above when she'd followed the Aquaphibians. One of the viewing portal 'eyes' had been covered over with a shiny reflective material, evidently a hasty repair. Marina realized that this must be the very submarine that she and Doctor Venus had travelled in before they were captured. Perhaps Stingray was here too.

Marina began to search, keeping close to whatever cover she could find. She could see the huge alien submarine fleet sitting on the sea bed ahead of her. Then, to her immense relief, her eyes suddenly lit upon another familiar shape; she'd found Stingray!

Marina's spirits lifted as she swam towards the supersub. Stingray was in darkness and the hatch in the bow of the sub had been left open. There was no sign of life.

Marina quickly entered the WASP submarine and closed the hatch behind her. Within minutes she had passed through the airlock onto the lower deck and was climbing the companion ladder up to the control cabin. What next? She must get Stingray away from here. Her skills were limited, but she'd learned enough to get the sub underway — and if necessary she could fire its weapons.

Marina sat down at the controls and began powering up.

Suddenly she heard the outer hatch being opened again. She looked through the forward window and saw an Aquaphibian lowering itself into the supersub — she had been followed from the cave...

The airlock drained and the inner hatchway swung open. The Aquaphibian confidently entered Stingray with its rifle-like weapon held ready. The creature saw Marina looking down at it from the upper deck and realised

that she was unarmed. It contemptuously dropped its weapon near the hatchway and sprang up the companion ladder after her, a predatory gleam in its eyes...

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The sleek silvery-blue luxury space yacht, Lady Anne, fired up its main engines and turned gracefully away from the now abandoned police cruiser and headed for interstellar space.

Admiral Beatty thoughtfully sipped a whisky and soda as he watched the police ship receding into the distance. As he relaxed in the comfortable lounge of the Lady Anne he felt much relieved to find he was among friends and heading swiftly out of the Solar System, rather than helping police with their enquiries.

A tall middle aged woman walked over and joined him beside the panoramic windows, "So Beatty old man, what's the situation?"

Beatty turned and shrugged, "Plan B I'm afraid Sam."

"I thought as much. Still, can't be helped. All for the good at the end of the day."

Beatty drained his glass, "Yes. All for the good."

"Is your man Bandranaik coming along with us?"

"No. I'm sure he would not approve."

"Too bad. I never did like him though. Weak."

"Oh, but he was very useful, up to a point."

"No world domination after all. Just planetary oblivion..."

"Just a minor setback. There's plenty more worlds out there to dominate, it'll just take a little longer."

"I've always admired your optimism. But what do you make of the Aquaphibian creatures Beatty? Can we really trust them?"

"As much as we can trust anyone. Besides, they hold all the cards right now."

"You brought our insurance policy I hope?"

Beatty nodded, "Jacob's got it all in safe keeping."

"I gather you were followed."

"Yes. It seems so. I thought he might be one of yours."

"No, I knew you would be coming here. Besides, off world is outside WIN jurisdiction. Have to play by the rules don't you know?"

Beatty nodded, "Seems he's just some cranky salesman who thinks he's being clever. I understand our host is having a word with him before he's disposed of."

"So when is the Great Finale? After we've left the stage I trust?"

"Very soon I understand. A matter of days, perhaps hours. Those space Aquaphibians have no patience, and are totally ruthless."

"And the Earth's leaders and their forces are all hopelessly confused and too wrapped up in their own petty internal affairs to notice."

"Yes, and I think we should all take full credit for that." said Beatty calling a steward over and ordering another drink

-----

Aboard Swordfish, Fisher was adjusting his hydrophone headset, "Atlanta! I'm picking up something at very long range. Not Terror Fish... Sounds like seven... No, eight of them. Smaller than Terror Fish."

"Give me a bearing," Atlanta said, her throat dry. "We'll get a closer look."

“Bearing Green two six seven.” Fisher frowned, “They are coming from the wrong direction. Surely Titan would be coming from the North east, not the West.”

Atlanta tried to imagine what Troy would have done in this situation. “Red thirty degrees. Let’s go see for ourselves.”

Fisher wanted to say, “but...” He bit his lip instead. “Aye, aye sir, Red thirty.” Swordfish swung around onto her new heading.

“They are moving far too fast to be Terror Fish... Rate six.” said Fisher

Atlanta shrugged, “So maybe Titan has something else. Or maybe....”

“It’s not Titan.” they both finished.

“We are heading for reefs and shallow water. Think we can handle it?”

“I’d advise against it Skipper.”

“So would I. But we’re going to have to try anyway...”

-----

Mason had brought the ‘other’ Smith to a palatial and very comfortable looking office. The walls were lined with awards and photographs and a few paintings. The largest painting, of a rather large man, hung on the wall behind a very similar looking large man seated behind a very large and expensive antique desk. The man gestured for Mason to leave and then nodded to Smith, he didn't smile. "Do come in. Please take a seat would you? I am most eager to meet you."

"The feeling is mutual," the salesman said cordially as he casually sat down in the chair opposite the man’s desk, setting his briefcase down beside him. "Mr. Jacob Richards isn't it? How's the media business? You own most of the Earth's media now I believe, don't you?"



"Oh, I'd rather you told me about your line of work Mr. Smith. The men who brought you aboard seem to think you are a toy salesman. Frankly, I doubt this."

"You mean those fake policemen?"

"Fake?"

"Real Martian police don't carry the military issue mark 5 ray guns, they still use the old mark 3s."

"How clever of you to notice. Some of my personal staff. I had to pick up a colleague quickly. You got in the way. The theatrical uniforms are very authentic but the guns had to be real, just in case. I own the cruiser. Genuine police surplus. Purchased. For film use..."

"I also noticed you have some other rather high profile guests aboard."

"Really? That's very observant of you for a toy salesman. A drink? A Marscini perhaps?"

Smith smiled, "Tea. Milk, no sugar."

"As you wish." Richards leaned forward and pressed a series of buttons at the side of his desk. "Venusian?"

The salesman nodded and as if by magic, a cup of Venusian tea appeared on a side table beside him.

"The Lady Anne is fully automated. Having servants around is so tiresome. Now, I believe you were going to tell me your real name and your real line of work."

The man produced a shield shaped plastic badge from his pocket and pinned it to his lapel, "I'm a Special Agent Mr. Richards. Code name: Twenty One."

"A cheap novelty toy badge. How amusing."

Twenty One quietly sipped his tea.

"I'm afraid my men had very little time to inquire about your real business out here. I, however, have plenty of time."

Twenty One looked up from his tea, raising his eyebrows, "All the time in the world?"

"Rather more than that I would say. Now, tell me, 'Agent Twenty One', why were you following my colleague?"

"Admiral Beatty? Well, for one thing, I wanted to find out who all his friends were."

"I see. And why pray tell would you want to know this?"

"Long story."

"We won't be disturbed. Go ahead."

"Well, Mr. Richards, have you ever been to a planet called Zofeit?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Well, I was there about ten years ago, as part of my job."

"Selling toys I suppose?"

"No. My company needed information. You see, despite our best efforts we were unable to sell them our toys. We wanted to establish one of our branch offices there."

"Really."

"We found out that the Zofeits were all essentially pacifists, which is why the majority of our toys were of no interest to them. More than that, they were regarded as repugnant."

"You have a point to make?"

"Yes. I discovered that their scientists were working on a revolutionary non-violent way of protecting their planet from attack. A ray that would neutralize atomic and nuclear power sources of any hostile ships."

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"They told you that?"

"Let's just say that I found out. Unfortunately, it seems someone else also found out. The entire Zofeit people, bar a few, were wiped out by a race of Aquaphibians a couple of years ago."

"And?"

"And I believe the Aquaphibians have developed the ray far beyond the original intent."

"I see. Very impressive. You really are a secret agent. But you are far too late Twenty One. The die is cast, my inquisitive friend. The Earth, and the entire Solar System are about to feel the effects of the augmented Zofeit invention. With Earth out of the way, we are now simply travelling to join the new undisputed rulers of the Galaxy."

"Bearing gifts?"

"My, you have done your homework. Yes, we have all the blueprints for Earth's military hardware and other useful data. Useful to those with a thirst for conquest. And our Aquaphibian friends are very thirsty, very thirsty indeed." Richards pressed his intercom button, "Mason, come in here, would you."

Twenty One glanced down at his watch.

"What's the matter, Twenty One? Is it time for something?"

"Yes, I believe it is. High time."

There was a low buzzing sound from the ventilator grill in the wall.

Richards turned in annoyance, "Darned insects!"

Twenty One finished his tea, "Looks like a wasp to me."

Richards impatiently jabbed at the intercom again as the buzzing behind him grew louder, "Mason! Get in here man!"

The special agent smiled as he set down his cup and saucer, "Thanks for the tea Mr. Richards."

Richards didn't answer. He was slumped, unmoving, across his desk.

Tapping the centre of his shield shaped badge Twenty One glanced expectantly around the office. A few seconds later a wasp-like tiny robot insect flew onto his lapel and crawled behind the badge.

Twenty One walked back to the door which silently slid open at his approach. In the short outer hallway he took a moment to kneel down beside the prone form of Mason. After removing the ray gun from the man's holster and pocketing it, Twenty One carried the unconscious man back into the office, and deposited him on to a vacant chair.

Satisfied that the two men were going to be out for some time, the agent now turned his attention to the large portrait of Jacob Richards that hung on the wall behind the desk.

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Deep under the alien sea, Colonel Zodiac piloted Fireball Junior along the course that Professor Matic had given him. As he drew nearer to his destination he realized they'd been mistaken. This was no underwater city. There, stretching out across the seabed, was a massive fleet of spacecraft; not unlike the space-submarines that he'd pursued, but much, much larger.

Steve estimated there must be at least a hundred craft. His heart missed a beat. This must be the super-weapon — the fleet of ships that could extinguish stars. He wondered whether to risk sending a signal to Matt and Ninety, have them come in and destroy the subs. He decided he'd likely cause the aliens to launch their armada, and he doubted that the two Fireballs would stand a chance against them.

Cautiously skirting Fireball Junior around the assemblage of behemoths, Steve gathered all the data that he could.

He was surprised to suddenly see the distinctive silver and blue shape of the WASP submarine Stingray. Were any WASP crew still aboard? One good way to find out. Steve activated Fireball Junior's neutroni radio, setting it for short range UHF. No sense in telling too many folks he'd arrived. He kept one finger on the nosecone missile firing button — just in case. "World Space Patrol vessel Fireball XL5 to Stingray. Come in Stingray. Over..."

Steve waited, adjusting his display screen to get a better look at the WASP vessel. He could see signs of movement inside, friend or foe? "Fireball Junior to Stingray... Come in Stingray. Over"

Within the supersub the Aquaphibian's head jerked around when it heard Steve Zodiac's voice on the speakers behind it.

Marina took advantage of the unexpected distraction, and lashing out with her right foot, she kicked the creature over the railing sending it crashing heavily onto the deck below.

She hurriedly activated Stingray's radio and began tapping her fingernails sharply against the microphone. She had to stop after only a few seconds as she heard the Aquaphibian beginning to stir down below. Marina went back to the ladder leading to the lower deck and peered down. The Aquaphibian lay dazed but still very much alive at the foot of the ladder. Marina could see the creature's rifle still lying by the airlock hatchway. When she was half way down the companion ladder, she leapt over the Aquaphibian, in an attempt to reach the weapon before the alien could recover. The creature managed to grab her ankle and she crashed sprawling to the deck. Marina desperately tried to pull herself free.

As she struggled with the Aquaphibian, Marina was vaguely aware of the voice on the radio again, "Stingray? Can you respond?"

Another scaly hand grabbed at Marina's long hair, turning her over on to her back as the girl kicked out in desperation. She could taste the creature's foul breath as it casually inspected its struggling prey. It was incredibly

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strong and its claws were as sharp as razors. The Aquaphibian gripped Marina by the throat, lifting her from the deck. Her senses reeled as she was slammed hard against the bulkhead. As the vice-like grip slowly tightened she felt a numbing blackness overwhelming her.

-----

Lieutenant Fisher was feeling more than a little nervous as he monitored the soundscape ahead of Swordfish. He'd wanted action for sure, but he'd hardly gotten used to being aboard Swordfish and now they were in action for the first and possibly last time. Captain Tempest and Phones had often talked about their battles with Titan's mechanical fish, but Stingray hadn't taken on so many of them at one time. He cast a worried glance towards Atlanta Shore, his skipper, who'd never commanded a sub in battle before.

Atlanta's eyes were fixed on the controls. She was deep in her own thoughts. Would her father be proud of what she did today? Would she ever see him again? If only Troy was... was... She shook her head, "No time for any of that!" she told herself firmly.

"Atlanta!" Fisher exclaimed urgently, "The fish, they're starting to split up, fanning out."

"This is it then. They are preparing to attack. Seal water tight doors. Prepare sting missiles, we are going to need all of them."

Atlanta allowed herself one last worried thought, was Fisher up to this? Come to that, was she? She'd soon find out...

"Aye aye skipper. Closing watertight doors... Preparing sting missiles."

Atlanta adjusted the SoundScan screen. The local area map was replaced with a simplified visual of what Fisher was picking up on his hydrophones. A fuzzy dot moved slowly but steadily down the screen.

"That must be the nearest of them. Red one four."

"Red one four."

Swordfish arced gracefully around to her new heading.

Fisher was feeling calm now. "Ten thousand yards... Nine thousand ...There it is Atlanta!"

"I don't get this. It's ignoring us."

"You suppose we have to attract its attention?"

"Stand by to fire sting missile 1. We mustn't miss."

"One thousand yards... nine hundred yards..."

"Hold it!" Atlanta said urgently, "that's no terror fish... Looks more like one of those little World Navy subs."

"You're right Atlanta. It's a navy Piranha. That crazy fish camouflage had me fooled. What do we do now Skipper?"

"Slow to cruising speed and maintain our distance. I don't know what to make of this."

"Do you suppose the World Navy got here in time after all?"

"Sure looks like it. We'll have to break radio silence. See if you can contact that sub, but use very low power. We don't want to alert the enemy."

"Aye Skipper."

-----

Deep under the waters of the alien ocean, Fireball Junior rested silently on the seabed. Directly ahead, about a hundred yards away, lay the sleek WASP submarine Stingray.

Colonel Zodiac turned to his co-pilot, "Guard Fireball Junior, Robert."

The robot repeated his orders in a monotone electronic voice as Steve hurried from the control cabin. The response from Stingray had been short but clear. Someone had tapped out an SOS. There were people in trouble over there, possibly injured and they probably needed help fast.

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As Steve made his way to the equipment lockers in the jetmobile bay, he considered the possibility of a trap, but with all those hostile ships out there, a deception seemed unlikely. They could have simply blasted him out of the water.

Hastily Steve stripped off his uniform and pulled on his distinctive red and silver WSP wetsuit bearing the 'XL5' emblem. He buckled on a belt with a holstered ray gun and attached a first aid kit. Then, grabbing a face-mask, air tank and swim fins he stepped into the small airlock at the rear of the ship. The door hissed closed behind him and immediately water began to pour into the chamber. Steve put on the rest of his underwater gear as the airlock rapidly filled.

Seconds later the outer hatch opened automatically, and Steve pushed himself free of Junior and began swimming towards Stingray. He could see no signs of life as he approached the submarine, though light gleamed steadily from the windows.

All Steve's senses were alert as he opened Stingray's bow hatch and entered the airlock. Closing the outer door above him, he began draining the chamber, and hurriedly pulled off his face-mask, air tank and fins.

Steve drew his ray gun and stepped cautiously out of the airlock onto the sub's lower deck.

He was immediately confronted by the sight of the grotesque, inert bulk of an Aquaphibian; it lay sprawled face down across another body. There was no sign of movement. The smoking hole in the Aquaphibian's green-scaled back indicated that the creature had very recently died.

Crouching down, Steve carefully rolled the body aside — to reveal the still form of a beautiful young woman. Her eyes were closed and she didn't seem to be breathing. The light grey jump-suit she wore was badly torn, exposing angry red marks on her skin. Clasped tightly in her left hand was an Aquaphibian laser rifle.



Steve briefly glanced over at the body of the dead Aquaphibian; clearly the fatal shot had entered through its chest. Turning back to the girl, the Colonel's attention was suddenly drawn to her feet... her toes were webbed... Realization dawned. He was looking at the Pacifican princess, Marina. The member of Stingray's crew, who'd been a slave of Titan, until her rescue only a year ago.

Very gently, Steve lifted Marina's left hand, and checked for a pulse. He was relieved to find that she was alive, though her pulse rate seemed very slow. Was that good or bad for a Pacifican? He carefully began prizing the alien weapon from her rigid fingers.

Reluctantly leaving Marina on the lower deck, Steve made a quick search of the rest of the submarine. He found no other crew members — or Aquaphibians.

Steve holstered his ray gun and hurried back to Marina.

"Marina," he called gently as he knelt on the deck beside her, "can you hear me?"

There was no response. The girl's pulse rate was unchanged, and there was still no sign of breathing... Did she breathe? Did she have lungs like a human?

Steve considered using the drugs that he had brought in his first aid kit, but he dared not give her anything that might harm her strange physiology. He decided he shouldn't attempt to stimulate her breathing for the same reason.

Quickly stepping back into the open airlock, Steve scooped up some of the remaining sea-water in his face-mask. Then, sitting on the deck beside Marina, he let the water gently splash over the girl's face and body, hoping that it might revive her.

Somewhere in the dark depths of Marina's subconscious, instincts began to stir in response to the sensations of the cold salt water splashing over her body. Her skin was gratefully absorbing the water, rapidly extracting the precious oxygen. Part of the Pacifican girl's mind was now drifting up to a more conscious level. She was experiencing pleasure.

Through half closed eyes, Marina was now watching a handsome fair haired man, as he leaned over her, splashing water onto her face and body. She blinked. Was this a dream? She closed her eyes again, her mind drifting blissfully. More water caressed her. It felt so sensuous.

Marina opened her eyes wide. The man smiled down at her and made sounds with his mouth. The sounds meant nothing, though they were soothing, almost musical. Was this her Master? She could not remember, but felt that he must be. She looked up into the man's kind, smiling eyes, but was surprised to find that she could not feel his mind.

Abruptly, the man stopped splashing the cool water over her.

Why? Had she displeased him? Marina stretched her body enticingly and smiled up at her suitor, trying to encourage him to resume his attentions, but he simply returned her smile and continued to sing his strange song.

As Marina experienced a feeling of frustration and rejection, the emotions welling up inside caused her mind to begin to clear. She suddenly felt pain and fear.

The creature was trying to make her cry out — she could feel its mind — but she could not cry out; she had no voice. The creature grew angry, impatient to hear her screams. The rifle... Where was it? She convulsed, her head tossing from side to side.

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Aboard the space yacht, Lady Ann, the navigator was worriedly voicing his concerns, "But there's nothing out there Frank. This course is taking us way

out of the interstellar shipping lanes and into uncharted space. Shouldn't we check with Mr. Richards?"

The pilot shook his head, "No chance. You know how the boss gets all riled up if you ask him questions. He gave us this course and we follow it. Not our job to plan his routes."

The navigator sighed, "Ours not to reason why..."

"Yours but to do and die?" a voice said as the door slid open behind them.

"What?!"

The pilot turned in his seat and looked at Twenty One sternly,

"Sir, I'm sorry but I must ask you to leave the flight deck."

Twenty One stepped back half a pace and held up a hand. He smiled, "Just running an errand for Mr. Richards. He wanted me to check the course for him."

"Why didn't he just call on...? Oh never mind. Whatever. Tell Mr. Richards we're on the course he gave us, he needn't worry."

Twenty One pulled out a small notebook, "And that would be?"

"Five one six zero white."

"Spot on. Sorry to have troubled you."

"No worries. You one of the guests?"

"Yes, just got aboard," the agent said as he stared around at the array of control panels in apparent bewilderment.

"Oh yeah. Have a nice trip, it's gonna be a long one. Now if you don't mind we have work to do up here flying this ship."

"Surely," the visitor said as he returned the notebook to his pocket. "Looks like a very complicated business."

The man headed back into the ship, "Be seeing you."

"Happy now?" the pilot asked once the door had closed.

"Yeah, I suppose so." The navigator frowned, "Frank, do you hear a sort of... Buzzing noise?"

-----

Marina sat up... Where was she? A Terrainean was holding her gently in his arms. "Don't worry," the man was saying, "I'm Colonel Steve Zodiac — World Space Patrol."

Marina nodded numbly. She could see the body of the dead Aquaphibian lying only a few feet away.

"It's dead," the Colonel told her, "and there's no-one else aboard."

The man's voice seemed to be coming from far away, "Are you okay?"

Marina wasn't sure. As she sat on the deck her fingers gingerly probed for damage, tracing the ugly scratches and ripped clothing they encountered. She tried to stand, and the Colonel gently helped her to her feet. He reminded her of someone. Looking up into his face, she realised that this Space Patrol Colonel was a dead ringer for the heart-throb movie star, Johnny Swoonara. As the Colonel's strong arms effortlessly lifted her, she noted that unlike Swoonara, this man's well developed muscles and broad shoulders were real, and he stood tall even in his bare feet. Leaning in his arms Marina felt suddenly aware of what an awful mess she must look, her clothes torn, her hair dishevelled.

Marina put all such thoughts aside as she remembered Troy and the others. She had to make this Colonel Zodiac understand. Pointing to her mouth she shook her head emphatically.

“You’re Marina, aren’t you? The princess from under the sea — and you can’t talk. Listen, I have my spaceship nearby. We can get back over to it.” said Steve

Marina shook her head again, and pointed to the upper deck. With the Colonel’s help she made her way to the companion ladder. She began to climb, a little unsteadily, with Steve close behind her in case she lost her footing.

Once they were on the upper deck, Marina beckoned Steve to follow her to the relaxation bay. Picking up a small control pad from the table, Marina motioned Steve to look at a display screen mounted on the bulkhead, as she began pressing buttons on the hand-held device. Words started to appear on the screen.

“This interface translates my written language into English. Where are we?”

“We are on an uncharted planet many light years from our Solar System” said Steve

“I knew we were no longer on Earth” typed Marina “The water is so different here”

Steve nodded “What happened to the rest of the Stingray crew?”

“Captured. Captain Tempest and Lieutenant Sheridan are prisoners of Aquaphibians. I escaped. They need our help.”

Steve found it hard to ask his next question.

“Marina, have you seen Doctor Venus. The WSP Doctor? She was kidnapped.”

Marina nodded, keying in more words, “The Doctor is with the Stingray crew.” Seeing the anxious expression on Steve’s face, Marina added, “She is well. All are well but behave strangely, as if hypnotized.”

“Where are they being held?”

“On an island approximately twenty miles from here. I can take you there.”

“Can you pilot Stingray?”

“Yes, in a primitive fashion.”

“Marina, we’ll find the others, but first I have to destroy those space subs out there. They are preparing to wipe out life on Earth by tampering with the Sun.”

Marina nodded, remembering the thoughts that she’d experienced at the cave.

“Do you have magnetic mines aboard Stingray?”

Marina thought for a moment, “Yes. There should be twelve MkIV hydromic bombs. Not enough.”

“I have warheads aboard my ship too. We can at least reduce the odds.”

Marina typed, “I will help you.” Noticing Steve’s expression, she quickly added, “I insist Colonel — I move quickly underwater. I believe we have only a short time.”

Steve had to admit he could do with the help. “Okay Marina. Let’s get started... Oh... and please call me ‘Steve’.”

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"I don't get it Atlanta. No response... Wait... They're slowing..."

“Odd,” Atlanta said as she stared out at the navy sub, “Maybe they heard but can't transmit.”

Fisher suddenly clutched at his headphones, "Evasive Skipper!"

Atlanta responded instantly, "Red ninety! Rate two!"

Swordfish surged forward and to port as a torpedo shot from the front of the other sub and missed them — but not by much.

"Stand by to return fire! Prepare stings one and two."

"Stings one and two. Ready."

"They started this... Green one three five."

As Swordfish swung around to face its attacker Fisher called out a warning, "Atlanta, the other subs, they're turning, starting to head this way!"

"Fire sting one."

Fisher pressed the firing stud and sent a sting missile streaking towards its target, "Sting one away."

Seconds later the missile tore the navy submarine apart in a cloud of bubbling water.

Atlanta glanced apprehensively at the video display as seven ominous blue dots began to converge on their position. "We'd better keep low, make use of cover... it's going to be seven against one now."

"Make that eight skipper," Fisher reported, "Another craft moving in astern, range fifteen thousand yards."

Atlanta adjusted the sonar screen to a wider range. "I see it. Looks like we are well and truly on the menu! Prepare sting three."

Fisher selected the missile, "Sting three ready. Say, that eighth craft is on the surface... Pretty big by the sound of it. Must be a ship of some kind."

"But all the shipping was diverted... Wasn't it? We'll have to go up to SVS depth and take a look. Blow one, three, five and seven."

As Swordfish began heading upwards in a tight spiral, Atlanta kept a close eye on the Piranha subs. They were slowing now. They seem to be waiting for something...

Atlanta adjusted the focus on the Surface Video Scanner, "I see it... Looks like an ocean liner. Heading this way."

“The Navy subs are on the move again Skipper” called Fisher as he listened intently to the soundings being picked up by his hydrophones. “They’re rising towards the surface in the path of the ocean liner. They seem to be moving into an attack formation.”

“Warn that ship off. Tell them to close all water tight doors,” Atlanta ordered.

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Aboard the cruise liner ‘Serenity’ the radio operator was shaking his head as he spoke on the video link, “Sorry Captain, I’ve stripped the radio down, switched out the parts, checked everything and it’s still not sending or receiving. It should be, but it isn’t.”

Upon the bridge the captain sighed with exasperation, “So, we can’t call up the port authority, or anyone else for that matter.”

“I can’t explain it. It’s as if there’s nobody out there sir.”

“It’s strange, but it actually looks that way. There are no other vessels out here, but there was a lot of aircraft activity earlier. Not to worry Ian. We’ll be arriving in Sydney in about half an hour. It’s probably just those damned World Navy pilots playing around with their jamming equipment. Wargames I expect.”

“Mind if I come up on deck Captain? I’d like to see if I can spot one of those big fish everyone is talking about.”

“Why not? Better have Harry nursemaid the radio, just in case we get a call.”

“Have you seen the fish Captain?”

“No, probably dolphins, but it sounds like the passengers seem to find them exciting for some reason. Hear them shouting?”



The Captain flicked off the intercom and absently gazed out to sea to look where many of the passengers were pointing.

“What on Earth!”

His hand darted back to the intercom, “Engine room full reverse! Emergency!”

As the huge liner began to slow, the Captain stared in disbelief as two distinctive sinister trails of foam and bubbles headed straight towards his ship.

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Travelling at six hundred knots, several hundred feet beneath the ocean, Swordfish was rapidly closing the distance to the Serenity.

“Oh my God!” Fisher exclaimed when he heard the torpedoes on his hydrophones, “They’re opening fire on the liner!”

“Target those two nearest subs... Fire stings two and three.” ordered Atlanta Sting missiles shot upwards from Swordfish’s port and starboard tubes and found their targets in two bubbling explosions of superheated water — the shock waves of which miraculously deflected the torpedoes from their target.

Atlanta turned anxiously to Fisher, “How’s that liner?”

“Okay so far, but the other subs are closing in on her.”

“We’ll surface. Blow all tanks. Slow to cruising speed. Green One Five. We’ll have to get between that ship and the attackers or we’ll risk hitting it.”

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Many of the Serenity’s passengers were crowded along the ship’s rails, staring in disbelief at all the strange fish like craft heading towards them.

Suddenly there was a bright flash followed by a deafening explosion.

“Hey, look Brenda!” called one of the passengers to his wife “Those fish things are blowing themselves up!”

Brenda was rubbing her eyes, “But what’s happening? Are we being attacked?”

“I doubt it. Just fake torpedoes and dummy fish that blow up. Some kind of military stunt I expect.” said her husband hopefully. “Might even be holograms. Nothing to worry about. I’ll go get my camera!”

A loud chime announced that the ship’s public address system had been switched on.

“Attention. Attention. This is the Captain speaking. Please remain calm. We are going to go over the lifeboat drills you practiced earlier. Please treat this as if it were a real attack.”

“See Brenda, I told you so. Let’s go play abandon ship. Always wanted to do that.”

Up on the bridge the Captain switched off his microphone and wiped his brow as he turned to face his senior officers.

“But it is a real attack Captain... Isn’t it?”

“Gentlemen, we will treat this as if it were a real attack. Those are my orders. Get to it, and see that there’s no panic!”

-----

As Swordfish surfaced, two of the World Navy subs pulled back from their attack on the liner and swung around to face their new target.

“On my mark,” Atlanta told Fisher, hoping that she sounded calmer than she felt, “Red three zero. Wait for them to fire...”

“Now!” Atlanta shouted as the two Navy subs fired torpedoes.

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Swordfish turned sharply to starboard.

There was a loud explosion and Swordfish juddered.

“We’re hit!” Atlanta cursed, “Rear hydroplanes damaged. Red one sixty. Let’s get them in our sights!”

Swordfish swung around as the two enemy subs sped past her. Now the liner was behind them and they had two targets side-on.

Sting missiles blew them out of the water in blinding flashes of energy before they could open fire on the WASP supersub a second time.

“Boy!” Fisher gasped, “What are they packing into sting missiles these days?”

Atlanta was thinking fast, “We have to circle around the ship, protect its starboard side. They’re still a sitting target for those fake mechanical fish.”

As they rounded the stern of the Serenity, two more of the disguised Navy Piranha mini subs broke off their attack on the ocean liner and turned towards Swordfish.

“Seems we’re now the target of choice,” Atlanta observed grimly, “That’s good. I think... Green one nine, rate one”

The two Piranhas wasted no time and fired torpedoes at Swordfish.

“Dive, dive, dive. Flood Q,” ordered Atlanta as she took Swordfish down into a dive with the torpedoes following close behind.

“It’s no good...We’re too sluggish!” Fisher shouted over the whine of the engines, “can’t steepen the dive! Impact in five seconds.”

Atlanta threw the supersub into a sudden u turn at the last second and turned Swordfish back towards the surface.

The two torpedoes slammed into the sea bed and exploded, sending up a shower of rock fragments and tossing Swordfish on to her side.

“We’re hit!” Atlanta cried out as they struggled to bring the sub back onto an even keel. Red lights were flashing on the control console and she quickly made some checks. “Ballast tank three inoperable. Otherwise we’re okay.”

“Skipper! Those two fish are coming down after us. Bearing...”

“I see them. Red twenty! Fire Sting Missiles six and seven,” ordered Atlanta, “We’re not giving those Navy traitors another chance to fire at us”

A few moments later there was only one World Navy Piranha sub left. Its sister vessels destroyed, it broke off its attack on the ocean liner and dived, heading away from Swordfish at rate six.

“We’ve got to capture that sub,” called Atlanta as she pulled Swordfish around to follow the Piranha, “Got to find out who’s really behind this attack.”

As the minutes went by, the damaged Swordfish fell more and more behind as it struggled to maintain rate six.

“She’s still gaining on us Skipper” called Fisher as Atlanta tried to coax more speed out of Swordfish’s Drumman-WASP Hydrojet Turbine.

The chase seemed all but lost as Fisher heard the sonar returns from the Piranha grow steadily fainter.

“We’re losing them Skipper,” he reported resignedly, “At this range it’s getting hard to pinpoint their position accurately.”

“Give it your best, we have to try to nail that sub.”

“Their motors are starting to sound really rough... Hey! They’re slowing!” called a surprised Fisher.

“We’re starting to catch them up!” Atlanta said excitedly, “Stand by... They must be turning to attack!”

“No Atlanta,” Fisher said as he concentrated on the sounds from his hydrophones, “It sounded like their power units just blew... They’ve lost all motive power.”

Ahead of them, the Piranha sub abruptly lost speed and began a slow circling dive to the sea bed below.

Fisher monitored the craft’s descent on his headphones as Swordfish drew rapidly nearer.

“She’s down Skipper, and there’s no sounds from the engines.”

“I see her... She’s lying on her port side. Let’s get down there.”

Atlanta set Swordfish down on the seabed, close to the crashed submarine.

“Now we’ll get some answers.”

Lieutenant Fisher quickly donned his wetsuit and within a few minutes he was setting off with a seabug to get over to the stricken sub. He tested his radio as he moved away from Swordfish, “Atlanta, are you receiving me okay?”

Atlanta replied immediately, “Loud and clear, John. Still nothing from the Piranha.”

Fisher was soon travelling over the starboard side of the small submarine. “It doesn’t look too damaged. There should be survivors... I’m setting the seabug down and then I’m going over to the viewports to take a look inside.”

Cautiously Fisher swam over to the sub. Clinging to the hull, he peered into the cockpit area. “Atlanta! There’s nobody inside!”

“But they can’t have gotten out, we’d have seen them. What can you see in there?”

“There are no obvious controls, no seats, just racks of electronic equipment... Atlanta, I think this thing must be fully automated.”

"We'll take it back to the WASP base in Brisbane for the scientists to examine. I'll get suited up and bring out a tow line."

"Hold it Atlanta! There's something else in those racks... High explosives — and they're wired in!"

-----

Admiral Beatty almost spilled his drink when Twenty One, his chrome coloured briefcase in hand, strolled confidently into the lounge of the Lady Anne.

Beatty's drinking companion smiled, "Well if it isn't agent Twenty One, of the Universal Secret Service."

Twenty one nodded, "In person, Ms. Fairfax, of the World Intelligence Network."

"I must say I'm surprised. So you are in on this deal too?" said WIN Chief Samantha Fairfax

Twenty One walked over to the stairs and leaned casually on the hand rail. "Not exactly..."

Beatty glared, "Samantha this is the man who tailed me!"

"What's your game Twenty One?" Fairfax demanded.

"My game? I'm here to foil your dastardly plot of course."

All eyes turned to the door as two of the fake policemen suddenly burst into the room, ray guns drawn, "Okay wise guy, drop that case."

Fairfax shouted a warning, "Don't fire those guns in here you fools!"

"It's getting rather stuffy in here don't you think?" Twenty One said conversationally, "Anyone mind if I open a window or two?" Suddenly hurling his case at the two guards he pulled Mason's ray gun from his pocket and blasted out the window panels.

The shriek of an alarm siren was abruptly drowned out by the sound of shrieks of a different kind and the sound of rapidly escaping air and breaking glass.

Twenty One let the ray gun spin from his hand as he clung desperately to the stair rail, his legs flailing, as everything not secured in place rushed through the shattered windows and out into space.

After what seemed like an eternity, Twenty One's numb fingers lost their grip and he fell silently to the deck. It was now very quiet in the empty lounge. There was no sound at all, there was no air at all.

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Very cautiously Lieutenant Fisher was examining the outer hatch to the Piranha submarine. "Sealed and wired for detonation... I'll have to try getting in through the torpedo tube instead. I'll get some tools from the seabug."

Atlanta Shore was watching anxiously from the controls of Swordfish, "No John," she said over the radio, "It's too risky. I want you to return to Swordfish. We'll have Captain Jordan get a WASP bomb disposal team down here..."

"Listen Atlanta, I've trained in bomb disposal. If this thing blows up we'll have no evidence that it was a Navy sub. This was a false flag attack for sure. This sub might be just the thing to get your father off the hook and out of that prison."

Reluctantly Atlanta had to agree. She climbed out of her seat, "Okay John, I'll get my wetsuit and come over to help."

"Much appreciated Skipper," Fisher responded as he selected a toolkit from his seabug and secured it around his waist.

Soon Fisher was crawling into the narrow confines of the torpedo tube, “Here’s hoping that tube isn’t loaded.”

Atlanta had already suited up and was about to enter Swordfish’s forward airlock when Fisher radioed again. “Atlanta, I think you’d better get Swordfish clear.”

“She should be safe enough where she is...”

“No, she won’t be. I’ve located the explosive. At first I thought there wasn’t any, just the wiring and the detonators. Then I found something very small and very nasty. I’ve opened up the explosive pack Atlanta. It’s Vesuvium 9.”

“It can’t be... Can it?”

Over in the Piranha sub, Fisher had taken off his face-mask and placed it beside him on a console so that he could still use the radio. “I’m no expert in planetary demolition but I’m pretty sure of what I’ve got here.”

“How much Vesuvium?” asked Atlanta.

Lieutenant Fisher was carefully taking apart an unimpressive looking grey box, “Oh, only a few drops, but more than enough to completely disintegrate every molecule of this submarine and anything within maybe a half mile of it, give or take a quarter mile.”

“Get clear John. That’s a direct order!”

Fisher continued to work calmly and steadily, almost grateful of the distraction of the conversation. “Sorry Skipper, no can do. I’m afraid I had to make a bit of a mess of the torpedo bay when I entered. I’m trapped here for now. The cabin is flooding. If the cold sea-water hits the explosive or even the detonators...”

“John! I can’t leave you there.”



“If we both get ourselves killed there’ll be nobody to file a report on what’s happened out here. Don’t worry, I’m not intending to die a hero Atlanta. I want to be around to collect my medals in person.”

As he worked, it seemed to Fisher that Atlanta’s voice was coming from somewhere very distant.

“Make sure you do Lieutenant, I’m not collecting them for you. Don’t go away... I’ll be back to pick you up. Good luck John...”

“P.W.O.R.”

Lieutenant Fisher didn’t spare a glance towards Swordfish as the sub left the seabed and headed swiftly away. He shrugged off his air-tanks and set them down carefully on the deck beside him. He was intent on his work. His life depended on him getting this right. “Now, how do I disconnect the detonators without disturbing the Vesuvium 9?”

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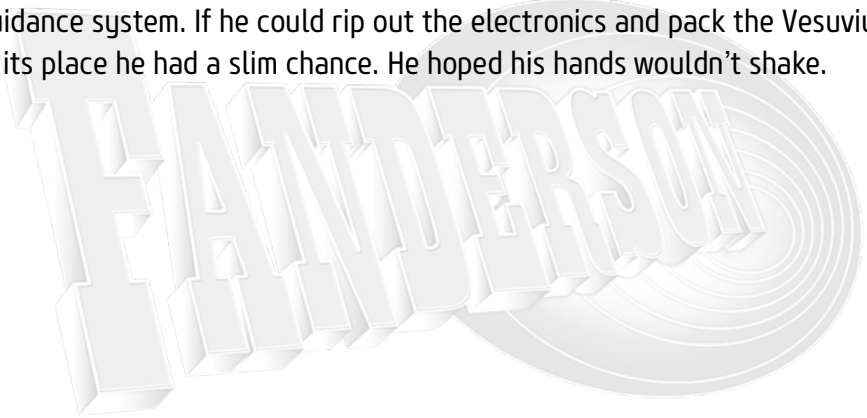
The Lady Anne was cruising at high velocity as it moved out of the Solar System and headed into deep space. Twenty One swung himself out of the shattered lounge window, carefully planting both feet onto the outer hull as he did so. Pausing for a moment, he took another oxygen pill. Then he began cautiously moving along the ship’s hull, his shoes’ magnetic soles gripping to the maintenance walkway with each step. Despite the high speed of the yacht, there was no sensation of movement, everything seemed eerily still. Twenty One was acutely aware that the apparent stillness would come to an abrupt and deadly end if the ship were to change its velocity. He checked his watch and calculated that he had less than twenty minutes or so before the ship’s video monitoring systems could be repaired. He would have to work fast.

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Lieutenant Fisher considered his options. If he couldn't disconnect the detonators from the Vesuvium cylinder it would explode, in about twenty minutes. If the water level rose by another four feet, the Vesuvium would explode. If he tried to open the upper hatch the explosive charges would detonate the Vesuvium. If he disconnected the detonators it was a fair guess the Vesuvium would explode.

He really didn't want to be anywhere near the explosion if it happened and he was pretty sure it was going to happen.

He looked back at the torpedo tube. There was one torpedo left. Fisher began unscrewing the water-tight compartment that contained the guidance system. If he could rip out the electronics and pack the Vesuvium in its place he had a slim chance. He hoped his hands wouldn't shake.



## **Chapter 21**

### **Awakening**

Jacob Richards slowly began to wake up. A siren was blaring out over the wall speakers. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes as he tried to think. He could see Mason, slumped in the chair opposite, unconscious.

Richards suddenly leapt to his feet and stared around the room, "Smith! Where is he?"

Mason stirred and opened his eyes, "The alarm, we must have hit something!"

Richards turned off the wall speakers and pressed an intercom button, "Archer! What the blazes is happening?"

The intercom remained silent.

"Maybe the flight deck was hit?"

Richards impatiently stabbed at a few more buttons, "Completely dead! Get out there and find out what's going on! And get yourself another gun, man! That 'Smith' of yours is some kind of spy. He's up to mischief. Eliminate him on sight!"

"Yes sir."

"Wait. If we've taken damage we might have lost air." Richards opened a desk drawer and took out a small pill box, "We'd better take some of these... These..."

"Chocolate drops?" Mason suggested as he eyed the contents of the box.

-----

At rate five, Swordfish was speeding back to the liner's last plotted position. Atlanta forced herself to concentrate on the job at hand. She'd always wondered how her father could seem so calm and remote in the Control Tower, while men and women might live or die based on his orders. Now she felt she understood. "All down to being a good actor," she told herself. Right now she had to check if the cruise liner needed help and whether there were any other vessels in danger.

Atlanta had been trying in vain to make radio contact with the *Serenity*. She fervently hoped that this was just down to the radio. Something still seemed to be jamming all long range frequencies. She couldn't contact anyone.

Atlanta turned back to the radio with relief when she heard a woman's voice calling, "Tower to Swordfish... Tower to Swordfish... Please respond..."

Atlanta reacted automatically, "Swordfish to Tower, this is Lieutenant Shore."

The voice on the radio was replaced by that of Captain Jordan, "We've been trying to reach you Lieutenant. What is your situation?"

"Captain Jordan, we intercepted submarines engaged in an attack on..."

The radio crackled as Swordfish was jolted by a sudden turbulence. Atlanta glanced down at her monitor screen in horror. There had been an explosion far behind her on the seabed.

-----

"Well that's it, gentleman," Doctor Venus announced with satisfaction. "You will be glad to know that was the final experiment."

"That's great," Captain Tempest sighed as he began to dress in a shabby grey overall, "I'm sure glad that's over." Troy frowned as he struggled to remember how long he and Phones had been on this beach, helping Doctor Venus with her experiments.

"Well, I sure hope it was all worthwhile," Phones muttered wearily, as WASP technicians unstrapped his arms and legs. He'd been secured to a device that would not have looked out of place in a mediaeval torture chamber. "Boy, I could murder a steak. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut after all those food pills."

Troy was still trying to remember, "Say, Doctor Venus, do these tests affect memory? I feel kinda... muzzy."

Venus looked blank for a moment and then smiled reassuringly, "Oh don't worry Captain Tempest, you'll feel fine in a little while. Just relax, try not to think about it."

But Troy wasn't listening. He was mesmerized by the lovely space doctor, and was now feeling very attracted to her. He really wished she'd call him 'Troy'. He wondered whether he might invite the gorgeous blonde back to his place tonight to, well, to get to know her better. Marina seemed to have disappeared — maybe visiting Pacifica? Now, if he could only throw Atlanta off the scent...

-----

There was a thumping on Jacob Richards' door, "Mister Richards? Mister Richards!"

Richards released the door lock and Mason rushed into the office.

"Sir, the main lounge was depressurised. No other damage, sir except I found the flight crew had also been knocked out."

"Really? Are we still on course?"

"Yes sir. I've got Nolan looking after the controls while the pilot and navigator are recovering."

"Any guest casualties?"

"We're establishing that now sir, but we know the spy was one of them. While we were both taking our nap, Bradley and Morgan found him fooling around in the communications room. They cornered him in the lounge. Seems there was a fire fight, the windows must have been hit and the automatic doors sealed. Nobody could have survived."

"How unfortunate. Needed redecorating anyway I suppose. Were any transmissions sent?"

"No sir, There's just a temporary disruption to our internal communications net."

"I suppose this just means fewer guests for dinner tonight then."

-----

Atlanta had made her initial report to Captain Jordan. Now that radio transmissions were working normally, Jordan had been able to confirm that the cruise liner *Serenity* was safe and being escorted to Sydney harbour by a World Navy destroyer. Atlanta was now taking *Swordfish* back to return to... the area where she had left Lieutenant Fisher.

There was no way to contact Fisher at long range, he'd only had his suit radio.

Time to report in. Atlanta turned to the radio, "Swordfish to Tower."

Captain Jordan responded, "Tower to Swordfish. Receiving."

"Captain, I'm nearing the position of the downed *Piranha*. There's a large crater, about a quarter of a mile across. I'm going down closer to the seabed."

Atlanta adjusted *Swordfish's* hydroplanes and throttled back to cruising speed, taking the sub down in a wide spiral dive.

"Picking up something on the aqua-scan... It could be the *Piranha*... Moving to investigate."

“Standing by, Swordfish.” responded Jordan

A faint voice on the radio caught Atlanta’s attention, “Hey, Lieutenant Fisher to Swordfish... Do you hear me?”

Atlanta hastily switched frequencies, “Swordfish here Lieutenant. Are you okay John?”

“I am now Atlanta. Things were a bit touch and go but I was able to jettison the Vesuvium in a torpedo.”

“Acknowledged. I’m bringing Swordfish alongside.”

“Tower to Swordfish. Atlanta, what is happening down there?” called Captain Jordan over the supersub’s radio.

“Lieutenant Fisher was successful sir. We have the World Navy sub intact for examination.”

“Well done both of you. I will have a WASP salvage crew sent out to you immediately. Remain with the sub until they arrive and then escort them to the WASP base in Brisbane.” ordered Jordan.

-----

Doctor Venus looked around in confusion as the WASP technicians suddenly began to hurry away, heading towards the sea. Was that supposed to be happening? Then another thought came into her mind, causing her to scowl and bite her lip. She turned back to Troy and smiled, “Captain...” she began, but stopped short, grimacing as if in pain. Then, taking a deep breath, she continued, “Troy, I want you to come back to my place. I would... like to get to know you better...”

Troy blinked. Was he daydreaming?

“I guess,” Troy told himself, “the old Tempest charm never fails...”

"And..." Venus added, as she stepped between the two officers, and linked arms with them, "I want you to come along too, Lieutenant... er, Phones..."

"Uh?" Troy stammered, "You mean both of us? Right now?"

"Yes," Venus said firmly. "That's right, Troy."

Troy and Phones made no effort to resist as the young woman marched them briskly away from the beach. But as they drew near to Venus's apartment, something caused Troy to hesitate; this didn't feel quite right somehow.

Doctor Venus tugged at his arm, "Don't dawdle Troy, I want to get started right away."

"Started?" Troy mumbled incoherently.

As if by way of explanation, Venus put her arms around Troy's neck, and kissed him passionately.

Some sixth sense made Troy pull away and turn his head. He was horrified to see Atlanta Shore, standing in a nearby doorway, watching them. Her face was expressionless.

-----

Jacob Richards looked up from his desk to see a large Chinese man enter his office. "Richards! What is the meaning of this?"

Richards shrugged, "Just a snooper of some kind Mr. Chen. He's been neutralised. Don't worry, there's only minor damage to the ship."

"Really? I understand you arranged to have the man brought aboard. And as a result, Fairfax, Beatty, and a couple of your worthless thugs have also been 'neutralised'."

"That's of no consequence. They were useful, now they're not."



"How very compassionate. Tell me, are you suggesting, that you yourself are 'useful'?"

"I have obtained our insurance to guarantee gratitude from our masters."

"I have no master, Richards. Masters are for inferior life forms such as yourself. Perhaps you would like to show me this great treasure of ours?"

"Most certainly. You will be impressed."

"That I doubt."

Richards pressed a stud under his desk and the large portrait of the media mogul slid aside to reveal a wall safe. He took a briefcase from the safe and set it carefully on his desk.

"I see, Richards. Very nice. Embossed with a navy crest... Gold plated auto destruct lock... Just the thing for the Aquaphibian about town. And the contents?"

"The technological military secrets of the world. The Earth that is. All micro-miniaturised. Army, Navy, WASP, WSP, WIN... The destruction of the Earth is only a minor setback. We can quickly rebuild our military might." said Richards confidently.

"My, wasn't Admiral Beatty a busy fellow? Forget your media hype for once Richards. Open it."

Richards carefully entered the code and swung the lid open.

Chen looked inside. "I see. Very nice packaging... 'Martian Delights'."

"What?"

"And what do we have inside? Oh, this is delightful, a tiny plastic model of a submarine, a spaceship, some kind of air-car and a Fireflash airliner, if I'm not mistaken... As you said Richards, the Earth's most advanced technology, all in miniature. Splendid. Our Aquaphibian friends will be delighted, no doubt."

Richards turned pale, "He did this..."

"I think Mr. Richards, that you can no longer be considered to be 'useful'."

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"Atlanta." Troy stammered, feeling more uncomfortable with each passing second, "This isn't what it looks like... I... We were just..."

Atlanta said nothing, she simply ignored him and strode briskly away, heading towards the beach.

"Honey, wait!" Troy called after her, as he tried to pull himself free of Venus's grasp. "Atlanta! I can explain!"

Venus didn't release Troy's arm. Her grip tightened as she almost dragged him along with Phones.

As they turned the corner to Venus's accommodation, a large, ugly Aquaphibian stepped from the shadows, brandishing a ray gun.

"Stop!" it hissed as it moved towards them.

-----

On the flight deck of the Lady Ann the navigator watched as indicator lights on his control panel began turning from red to green, "Internal and external communications back online Frank. All powering up nicely."

The pilot nodded, "It's all systems go then."

"Hey Frank, I'm picking up a radio call... Someone calling up the WSP."

"Could be someone in trouble. Who's sending it?"

"They're not saying... Some kind of coded message. But it sounds like it's a very local transmission, very close. Directly behind us."

"That's odd Dave," the pilot frowned as he adjusted his controls, "there's nothing on the astroscope."

"You don't suppose someone survived that explosion in the lounge?"

The pilot shook his head, "Supposing is above my pay grade. I'll call up Mr. Richards. Flight deck to Mr. Richards..."

"What now?" Richards switched on the intercom, "Richards here."

"Mr. Richards, there's some kind of coded message going out to the WSP. It's repeating over and over. It's a local broadcast. Some way aft of our position, moving at a speed close to ours."

"Another ship?"

"No sir, nothing on the scanners. It must be pretty small. Mr. Richards, it seems to be coming from approximately the area where the debris from the lounge would be."

"And what," Chen asked impassively, "do you propose to do now, Mr. Richards? Someone or something is relaying our position to the World Space Patrol."

"Archer, increase to space velocity 4 and change course — Two one nine zero red. Immediately!"

"Yes Mr. Richards. At once sir."

Richards snapped off the intercom.

"It seems, Richards, that you've been outsmarted, again." said Chen

"That stupid toy salesman!"

"Not so stupid. I believe he was working for the Universal Secret Service. They do not employ stupid people. Regrettably, I cannot claim the same for myself."

"It's not a problem Mr. Chen. We'll soon be out of the target zone and all of our enemies will be neutralized when the Aquaphibians strike."

“Soon? I hear no rocket motors firing. Your pilot seems somewhat tardy at taking orders, does he not?”

Richards hurriedly turned his attention back to the desk intercom, “Archer, why haven't we accelerated?”

“Mr. Richards,” the pilot replied nervously, “The engines... They're not firing!”

Richards turned pale, “What!?”

Chen's face was devoid of emotion, but his words were laced with contempt, “To use a favourite word of yours, Richards, the engines appear to have been neutralized.”

“Mister Richards,” Archer continued, “We've run a diagnostic on the main engines. There seems to be a severed fuel line topside. Someone will have to go out there and fix it.”

Chen pointed a finger at Richards, “Take a repair team and see that those engines are repaired swiftly. There is no time for delay.”

-----

The salvage crew managed to lift the disabled World Navy Piranha sub to the surface without too many problems and Swordfish was soon escorting them back to the WASP Base at Brisbane with their prize.

The following day the Piranha had been stripped down and the state of the art automation that had controlled it, and evidently the other destroyed mini subs as well, was found to have been produced by Chen Industries — a company that had many manufacturing sites in the Solar System and beyond.

It's most recent factory had been opened on Zofeit less than a year ago.

The World Aquanaut Security Patrol reported its findings to the USS who tried to contact its multi-billionaire owner Chen Shun without success. They

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were told he had left the Solar System on a business trip and his PA was unsure when he would be returning to Earth.

Captain Jordan ordered Atlanta to return Swordfish to Marineville for repairs before taking over Stingray's patrol duties.

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"Run!" Venus shouted, as she stooped to pick up a large rock and hurled it at the alien. The creature staggered back as the rock struck it in the chest.

Troy and Phones followed Venus as they all ran.

"Atlanta!" Troy exclaimed, "She was heading for the beach. I've got to find her! Phones! Get the Doctor to safety!"

Troy Tempest turned and ran back the way they had come. He soon saw Atlanta, she was carrying a rifle now, and hurrying towards the beach. As Troy caught up with the girl he reached out to take her arm, but she responded with a vicious blow with the butt of the rifle which sent him sprawling into the sand. She began firing towards the sea.

As he got to his feet Troy could see that there was another Aquaphibian advancing along the beach. It was firing deadly laser bolts at the WASP technicians who had been assisting Venus.

The sound of gunfire split the air as the technicians began returning fire with their WASP pistols.

"What the..." Phones exclaimed, hearing the sounds of battle. "Get inside and lock your door, Doctor," he told Venus, and began running after Troy. As he came in sight of the sea, he realized that the Doctor had followed him. Taking in the situation at a glance, Phones quickly pulled Venus down behind a row of consoles. "Stay down!" he yelled in her ear. "Skipper! You okay?" he shouted above the din.

"Yeah! You got a gun?" Troy called back from the cover of a nearby rock.

“Not yet Skipper - wait ‘til I get my hands on one of those Aquaphibians! Where’s Atlanta?”

“Behind cover — I hope...” said Troy

Phones pointed across the beach. “Here comes the cavalry, Troy!”

Lieutenant Fisher was running towards the test area from the nearby blockhouses, leading a small team of armed security guards. The young relief controller seemed oblivious to Troy and Phones as the fighting intensified.

A strangely silent security guard tried to find cover beside Troy only to be decapitated by a laser bolt. Grabbing the man’s fallen rifle, Troy dashed across the sand to join Phones and Venus. “Phones, get Doctor Venus out of here. I’ll cover you.”

Troy was shocked to see Fisher fall dead as a laser beam punched a hole in his chest. Phones and Venus started to crawl back to the blockhouses as Troy began firing at the Aquaphibians with the dead guard’s weapon. He had to help Atlanta. He could see her hiding behind the test equipment, pinned down by the laser fire from an Aquaphibian.

Troy wondered why he felt so strange. Was it the effects of the underwater breathing experiments?

Suddenly Atlanta leapt to her feet and began blazing away with a rifle at the nearest Aquaphibian.

The hideous creature swung its weapon around and returned fire. Troy saw a beam of intense laser light hit Atlanta, almost cutting her in two. “No!” he screamed in horror “No! Not Atlanta!” He ran forward careless of his own safety and knelt beside the smoking corpse of... of... All of a sudden, it wasn’t Atlanta’s body lying there in the sand. It was the shattered corpse of an Aquaphibian...

Half paralysed with shock, Troy looked around to see everything begin to shimmer and change. His heart pounded as he saw Aquaphibians where there had been WASP security guards and technicians. The two advancing Aquaphibians were now a World Space Patrol officer and...

“Marina!” Troy yelled, waving his rifle. The girl didn’t appear to hear as she moved catlike amidst the carnage, her laser rifle blasting with deadly precision.

Energy bolts burst around Troy as he raced back across the beach. He was breathless as he dived into cover beside Phones and Venus. “Phones,” he gasped, “Those aren’t Aquaphibians attacking! It’s Marina!”

“Easy Troy,” Phones said, grabbing his friend’s shoulders, “We saw what happened.”

“You’re in shock, Captain,” Venus said firmly. “We can’t help Atlanta now; we have to get you away from here.”

“No, it wasn’t Atlanta - it was an Aquaphibian,” Troy protested.

Phones exchanged a worried glance with Venus. “They’re coming this way!” he said urgently. “Give me the rifle Skipper.”

“It’s Marina I tell you!” Troy shouted desperately, as Phones tried to wrest the rifle from his grip.

“Let... go... of the rifle... Troy,” Phones grunted, as he fought for possession of the weapon.

Without warning, Venus suddenly sprang on to Troy’s back, wrapping an arm around his throat, and using her weight to throw him off balance. Troy dropped the rifle as he fell backwards, Venus still clinging tightly to his neck.

Phones dived for the rifle and quickly aimed it at the leering Aquaphibian, now only yards away.

“Phones don’t!” Troy yelled, as he wrestled with Venus, “It’s Marina — you’ll kill her!”

Phones began to squeeze the trigger, but a beam of light struck the Lieutenant square in the back. The rifle fell from his senseless fingers as the force of the blast threw him to the ground.

“He’s dead!” Venus screamed as she struggled to her feet. “They’ll kill us all!”

Horrified, Troy stared down at the body of his fallen friend. Was Phones dead? What if Venus was right, and he was the one hallucinating?

“Stand aside!” Colonel Zodiac ordered, pointing his ray gun at Venus.

Suddenly uncertain, Troy stood protectively in front of Venus, but Venus was terrified, she pushed him aside and began to run. She cried out in pain as a second ray blast struck her in the back. She collapsed in the sand.

Steve hurried over to kneel beside the fallen doctor. “Don’t worry” he told Troy without looking up, “they are just stunned. You’re Captain Tempest?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Troy acknowledged as he hugged Marina.

Steve looked quickly around the beach as he got to his feet, “Colonel Zodiac, World Space Patrol. Let’s go Captain.” The Colonel gently picked Venus up in his arms. “Bring your buddy, we don’t have much time.”

Troy hoisted Phones over his shoulder, “But where the heck are we Colonel?”

“You’re a long way from Earth. Come on, we’ve got to get out of here... now!”

Marina kept her laser rifle at the ready as they all hurried towards the sea.

All was quiet now. Aquaphibian bodies lay strewn across the alien beach. Troy grimaced as he stepped around the torn body of one of the aliens, “Thank goodness Atlanta is safe and sound, back in the real Marineville.”

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## **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.

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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.

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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...”

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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.

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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."

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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...”

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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!”

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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.

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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.

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“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.



## **Chapter 23**

### **Sneak Attack**

A man in his early 60s with receding grey hair and a moustache looked up from his desk, as if just realising he had a visitor.

“Please take a seat, Beatty,” he said absently as he turned his attention back to the paperwork.

Beatty didn’t sit down. “And who the devil, may I ask, are you?”

“No, in point of fact, you may not”, the older man replied pleasantly, without looking up from his papers.

Beatty watched as the man signed some of the papers and finally pushed them aside. “I trust you are well?”

“As well as can be expected.”

“Good. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I’d like an explanation for this treatment.”

“Ah, I see. Well it appears that you have been going around hijacking WSP craft and attempting to murder their pilots. Will that be sufficient explanation for the time being?”

Beatty decided to sit down. “Black, no sugar.”

“Now, let me see... I believe you were on the Lady Anne. Would you like to tell me about that?”

Beatty shrugged, “I may as well. We are all going to die anyway.”

The man nodded, "A sad fact of life I'm afraid. It happens to all of us. Please tell me about your being on the Lady Anne. I believe the yacht is owned by Mr. Jacob Richards, multi-billionaire media mogul."

"Yes, and I would still be on that ship if not for your fake toy salesman."

The door slid open and a pretty girl came in with a tray. Beatty noticed she was wearing a shoulder holster over her white blouse.

"One black with no sugar, one white with four sugars," she said brightly and put the tray on the desk.

The man behind the desk smiled briefly, "Thank you."

The girl nodded and left the room.

"Fake toy salesman you say. I presume you are referring to our 'Mr. Smith'. I can assure you he's a genuine toy salesman. Though," he held up one of the papers he had just signed, "not one of our best it must be said. He just cost us the Martian Delights contract by not showing up. I don't suppose you would know of his whereabouts?"

Beatty shrugged, "The last time I saw Smith he was in the lounge of the Lady Anne. Are you seriously telling me you run a toy company?"

"Amongst other things, yes, I do."

"Then what gives you the right to hold me here?"

"Ah, that would be one of those other things."

"Are you claiming that you run the Universal Secret Service?"

The door slid open again before the man behind the desk could answer and Gray walked in with the chrome briefcase.

"All checks read negative sir. It was still sealed. We've unlocked it."

"Thank you. Leave it with me."



Gray placed the case on the corner of the desk and with only a brief glance at Beatty, left the two men alone again.

“I’m sure you know this is ‘Mr. Smith’s’ briefcase. It’ll be very interesting to see what is inside, will it not?”

“If you say so.” said Beatty.

“You were telling me why you were on the Lady Anne.”

“We were leaving the Solar System. There will be an attack and you are far too late to stop it.”

“An attack?”

“The sun will be turned into a nova.”

“Interesting. Tell me, when this event will occur.”

“Maybe a day, maybe a few hours.”

“Hopefully then, we’ll both have time to find out what Mr. Smith has in this case of his.”

“Don’t you understand? We’ll all die!”

“You are becoming hysterical Beatty,” snapped the older man “Control yourself. Now tell me how you know about this threat to our Solar System. Who have you been working with?”

“I will tell you nothing unless you tell me your name” said Beatty

“You may refer to me as S. I am the Operations Director of the Universal Secret Service and you will answer my questions. The tea you have just drunk contains a powerful fast acting truth drug. Now who have you been working with?”

Beatty tried hard to resist the drug but within a few minutes he felt compelled to answer any question S asked him.

He told the USS Chief about the alien Aquaphibians original plan to invade the Earth after it's defences had been weakened by a war between the World Government and the undersea races which he and the WP had conspired to start with the help of the World Intelligence Network. He gave the names of all of his colleagues involved in the conspiracy. He admitted stealing the top secret plans that S found in Twenty One's recovered brief case with the intention of handing them over to the Aquaphibians in exchange for a position of power on the Aquaphibian ruled Earth. He had realised the other World Security Chiefs were turning against Bandranaik and would not allow the destabilizing war with the undersea races. He knew the WP would soon be removed from office. The alien Aquaphibians would therefore not risk invading Earth with its Security forces still at full strength. What they could not have they would use their nuclear retardant ray to destroy. Beatty had therefore tried to escape from the Solar System with his colleagues in the Lady Anne.

"You will be relieved to know that due to the efforts of my agent and other undisclosed sources we were warned about the Aquaphibian fleet approaching the Solar System days ago. A WSP task force is now on its way to stop them as we speak."

"They have no chance of stopping them," said Beatty. "The Aquaphibian ships are indestructible."

"Let us hope for all our sakes you overestimate them" said S. "If we survive this attack you will spend the rest of your miserable traitorous life on Conva. You will not remember this interview — in fact you will not even remember your own name after the amnesia drug you are about to be injected with takes effect"

"No. You can't do this to me" screamed Beatty. "I have my rights"

"You have no rights what so ever on Mars or Conva," said S as he pressed a button on his desk.

Grey and the two other USS agents entered S's office.

"Take him away" ordered S.

So the alien attack on the Solar System was imminent.

Well there was nothing more that he could do to stop it and no time to evacuate.

The USS would issue a suitable press release to explain Beatty's imprisonment if and when the Aquaphibians were defeated.

It would not include any details of the pending alien attack on the Solar System.

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Troy and Marina were cautiously making their way deeper into the undersea cave. Troy tensed when his flashlight picked out a sudden movement amongst the rocks ahead. As they edged closer he relaxed, it was just a fish. A large one — but just a fish.

Marina raised her rifle.

Troy hurriedly reached out his hand and pushed the rifle down,

"Marina — it's only a fish."

Marina shook her head violently and tried to raise her rifle.

The fish didn't move away, it simply watched, its mouth opening and closing.

Not the prettiest of fish perhaps, Troy thought, but it sure looks harmless.

"Leave it be!" Troy shouted as he tried to wrestle the rifle from Marina's grasp, "That's an order Marina!"

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Doctor Venus slowly opened her eyes and stared blankly up at the ceiling. She seemed to be spinning, around and around. She lay motionless until the

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spinning sensation subsided before trying to sit up. She was puzzled to find that she couldn't move her arms. The puzzlement rapidly turned into horror as her memory came flooding back. She was strapped to an operating table. Something warm touched her shoulder and she flinched in terror.

“Welcome ho-o-ome.”

“Zoonie?” Venus turned her head, “Zoonie! Whatever are you doing here? I was just dreaming about you...” Venus blinked as she tried to clear her vision. Looking around she soon realized that she was lying on a bed in Fireball's medical bay. There was someone lying on another bed.

With an effort, Venus pulled her arms free and began slowly unfastening the straps that held her down. As soon as she had removed the straps she leaned down to hug the lazoon.

“Whatever is happening... Why am I in here?”

Venus got unsteadily to her feet and looked down at her grubby grey overalls. She felt very weak. She recognised the man lying strapped to the other bed; it was Aquanaut 'Phones' Sheridan. He was dressed in the same strange overalls, apparently fast asleep. Kneeling down beside him, she gently lifted his eyelids.

“Heavy coma stun,” she said to herself. “Guess he'll be out for at least another hour without the antidote.”

Sitting back down on her bed, Venus tried to gather her jumbled memories together. Zoonie sat quietly beside her, his big head resting against her shoulder.

“I was kidnapped by Aquaphibians. Marina helped me and then...” Venus rubbed her forehead, “Then I woke up on an operating table. I remember being back at Marineville doing experiments of some kind. I invited Captain Tempest and Phones back to my apartment to.... to... And then Aquaphibians

attacked and I was shot.” She shook her head, “I must have been having some really tootie nightmares. Was any of it real? If only you could tell me, Zoonie.”

Venus knew that she’d have to find out what was going on. Had Steve rescued her from the Aquaphibians? Why had she and Phones been strapped down in the medical bay? She’d have to be careful... Perhaps the Aquaphibians had captured Fireball.

Venus slowly got up and walked unsteadily over to the open door with Zoonie padding along behind her. “Zoonie, you stay here,” she told him, “I’ll be back soon.”

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Troy pulled off his wetsuit jacket as he stepped onto Stingray’s lower deck. Marina looked confused, and a little afraid. Troy wasn’t angry with Marina, he was just surprised to see how irrational she could become. “Listen to me Marina,” he said carefully, “It was just a fish in that cave. Sure, it looked a bit like the one Titan calls ‘Teufel’, but Titan’s just superstitious. You don’t have to believe that crazy nonsense.”

Marina shook her head vigorously.

Troy put a reassuring hand on her shoulder, “Maybe that kind of fish looks scary to you — but I know a harmless fish when I see one. For all we know it’s a rare species; we aren’t here to destroy the wildlife.”

Troy pictured himself eating in the Marineville Tower Diner as Phones toyed with a fish-finger on his plate.

“Quick Skipper — better get your gun. I think this fish wants to rule the world. Think you can save Mankind again Troy?”

Troy blinked. That little daydream had been so vivid. He knew he'd never live it down if Phones found out he'd been shooting harmless fish while he'd been out in space facing alien battle-cruisers.

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Stepping cautiously out into the corridor, Venus quietly began making her way through the ship. Outside the navigation bay, she paused and listened. She opened the door, ducking back out of sight as it slid open. There was no-one there. She'd half hoped to see Matt sitting at his console...

Furtively Venus made her way over to the main console and flicked a switch. A large screen on the wall immediately displayed an image of Fireball's flight deck. She almost cried out when she saw Steve slumped motionless in his chair and Robert sprawled across the deck in front of him.

Stumbling along as fast as her weakened legs would carry her, Venus left the navigation bay and made her way down the corridor, and into Fireball Junior. When she reached the jetmobile bay she hastily grabbed a medical bag from a locker.

Venus fell to her knees as a wave of dizziness hit her.

"Physician heal thyself..." she muttered as she rummaged through the medical supplies. She swallowed a couple of pills before she staggered to her feet again.

Once inside Junior's control cabin, Venus rushed over to Steve. He was still breathing. "Oh Steve... What is happening?"

Through the clear expanse of the nose-cone canopy Venus could see the stars cartwheeling across the black void of space. Fireball was spinning rapidly.

Over the radio Matt was calling desperately, "Steve! You've gotta fire the port retros... Can you hear me? Fireball will break apart!"

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The strange alien fish in the cave redoubled its efforts to directly control the Stingray skipper. It had been concentrating on its Aquaphibian space-crews, urging them to ignore the attacking space-ships and destroy the Earth's Sun. But now Stingray was a more immediate threat. The Earth female had proved somehow resistant to its telepathic control, but the male was a different matter... The fish had probed Troy's mind, finding the strengths and the weaknesses. It had gently pushed the WASP captain, encouraging the right thoughts, making them stronger. It knew that if Marina was killed, the shock would likely bring Tempest out of its control, but there were other ways of having the human subdue the water-breathing female.

Marina realised that the fish in the cave must be using its telepathic powers to protect itself by influencing Troy. She had to explain. Get Troy to snap out of it. They had to destroy the fish.

Marina turned and hurried back to her cabin to get her translating device.

Troy followed her, "That's right Marina, you go and get out of those overalls. I guess we can both take it easy..."

Marina sat on her bunk as she reached up to a shelf to get the translator device. She turned in alarm as Troy pushed open the cabin door and grabbed her wrist.

"No need for that Marina," Troy told her as he kicked the door closed, "I know exactly what you want..."

Marina was shocked. She knew exactly what Troy had in mind.

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Venus quickly sat down in the empty co-pilot's chair, and reached across to activate the spaceship's retro rocket controls. She fixed her eyes on the readouts — timing would be crucial. Holding her breath, she began making

fine adjustments with the control yoke. To her relief, XL5 gradually righted herself, the swirling pattern of stars outside slowly coming to a stop.

As soon as the ship was stable, Venus took a hypodermic from the medical bag and gave Steve an injection. She watched his face anxiously for signs of a reaction to the drug.

“Ninety... Must stop him...” Steve mumbled.

Aboard Fireball XL1 Matt let out a sigh of relief, “Boy, Steve sure is one heck of a pilot. Wonder why he don’t answer? Guess the radio’s out... Still, one thing’s for sure, Steve is okay — he’d need a clear head for a manoeuvre like that one.”

Venus spoke quietly but firmly to Steve, who was still seated in the pilot’s chair, “Listen to me Steve, you are safe, I’m here. Everything is going to be okay.”

“Uh?” Steve’s eyes didn’t open but his head lifted slightly. “Venus?”

Venus leaned forward and kissed the Colonel briefly on the lips. “Yes Steve, it’s Venus.”

“Steve! Can you hear me?” Matt called from the radio, “There are three ships headed straight for you! Steve! Fire missiles!”

Venus didn’t hesitate. She sent a nose-cone missile straight towards the lead ship. Four more missiles followed from the extended missile racks on the port and starboard sides of the ship.

“Dive dive dive...” Venus said through clenched teeth as she pushed XL5’s nose down and fired the main boosters. The ship blasted forwards and downwards, beneath the oncoming ships.

On the central viewer, Venus could see that XL1 was launching



another salvo of missiles from her aft launchers.

“Great shooting Steve!” Matt exclaimed over the radio.

As Venus swung XL5 around to pursue the alien ships, she activated the transmitter, “Matt, I’m piloting Fireball... Steve’s unconscious... What is happening?”

Venus readied another batch of missiles as she spoke into Fireball XL5’s radio, “Matt... We’re coming up on those ships now... Preparing to launch interceptors!”

“Uh?” Steve groaned as he tried to focus his mind, “Interceptors?”

“Steve!” Venus said gently but firmly, “Just relax, you’ve got minor head injuries.”

“Relax?” Steve’s memory flooded back. “We’ve got to destroy those ships...”

“I know Steve... Missiles away!” Four interceptors streaked towards three target ships — and detonated tearing huge holes in their hulls.

“We’ve got to stop them...” Steve gasped. “Ram them like... Like Ninety did!”

“Ninety?” Venus said worriedly, “Steve what...?”

“Venus...” Matt called excitedly over the radio, “You’ve done it! They seem to be slowing down... Coming to a stop.”

“Maybe...” Steve said groggily, “They’re about to use that ray of theirs...”

“I don’t think so Steve, There’s no sign of a force-field. No sign of a power build up for their primary weapon. They are drifting dead in space. Only thing is, I have a feeling that was just the first wave...”

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Through Troy Tempest’s eyes an alien mind watched with cold satisfaction as Marina struggled in vain against his grip. Humans were so emotional. It

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would almost be regrettable to destroy this one. How easy it was to substitute raw emotion for reason.

Many light years away, deep beneath the Pacific Ocean, Teufel could sense that its adversary had lowered its guard at last. So, its distant relative had planned to destroy all life on Earth — including Teufel of Titanica. The fish concentrated all of its mental power on striking out at the attacker.

In that instant, Troy slightly relaxed his grip on Marina's wrists. She managed to pull a hand free and reached for her fallen translator. There was only one way to get through to Troy — she smashed the heavy device against his head. Troy fell forwards onto the bed and lay still.

Deep in the Pacific Ocean, the strange fish known as Teufel sank wearily down to the seabed, exhausted by its ongoing deadly telepathic struggles with its counterpart on the distant water-world

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Fireball XL5 and Fireball XL1 were hanging in free float not far from the wreckage of three huge alien spaceships.

Steve called up Professor Matic in XL1,

"Matt, we still can't get a message out on the neutroni. We've got to warn Space City."

"It's the radiation from all the missiles and debris Steve. Kinda like sunspot interference. We'll have to get clear of it before we can use the neutroni for long range transmissions."

"Can you give me a course Matt?"

"Steve, I figure it'll take those ships several days to reach the Solar System. We may be able to give Zero some vital information if we take a half hour or so to examine those wrecks."

"But what are you hoping to find Professor?"

"A way to get missiles through their force-fields. We made little impact but Venus gave them a real pounding."

"I see what you mean Matt. Some kind of Achilles Heel."

"I've been scanning those wrecks Steve, I'm not detecting any signs of life aboard. Power levels at zero. This might be our only chance to see what makes these ships tick"

"Okay Matt. let's go take a look around the nearest ship. Armed, just in case."

"Sure thing Steve, I'll go grab a thruster pack."

Steve called up Venus on the intercom who had gone back to the medical bay.

"How's your patient, doctor?"

"Lieutenant Sheridan is still sleeping peacefully Steve. I could administer the antidote..."

"Might be best to let him sleep it off. He may still be under hypnotic influence. Venus, I'm going over to look at those wrecks with Matt."

"Okay Steve."

"While I'm gone, try and get through to Space City. We've got to warn Earth those ships are on their way. Set up a repeating message. Then I want you to scan the area for any sign of Ninety."

"Yes of course. I'll go over to the navigation bay right away. Be careful Steve, there are very high levels of radiation out there. The oxygen pills should protect you but don't stay out there too long."

"Okay Venus. I'll go meet Matt and we'll take a look at those ships."

"Steve, you took a nasty blow to the head — you really should be resting."

"I guess resting will have to wait for now. This shouldn't take long."

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Tossing the broken translator to the deck Marina quickly climbed over Troy's prone body to get out of the cabin.

Once outside Marina sealed the door and hurried back up to Stingray's control area. She sat down at the controls and loaded both sting missile tubes and slammed her hand down on the firing buttons.

Four lethal sting-missiles sped from Stingray and chased one another towards the cavern. Seconds later, the missiles detonated and destroyed all trace of the cave mouth in great bubbling explosions.

The alien fish was still locked in a mental struggle with Teufel as the missiles exploded around it. There was no way it could protect itself this time — all of its energy was being used to counter the psychic onslaught. Within seconds Marina launched four more sting missiles at the site of the undersea cavern. More explosions ripped the seabed apart.

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Steve Zodiac had joined Professor Matic out in space and using their thruster packs they were getting near to one of the wrecked alien ships. He took his communicator from his belt, "Venus, we're over at the nearest ship..."

"Okay Steve. I've set up an automatic broadcast to Space City. The radiation is still blocking my calls. I'm making systematic scans of the local area for Ninety, but there's a lot of static."

Over in Fireball XL1, someone else was listening attentively to the radio. Sergeant Mahoney was sitting on a bunk in the space-jail, carefully twisting a pair of wires he'd torn from a light panel. He was going to use some of his vast experience in WSP security matters to get out of his prison...

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As the dust settled, Marina leaned forward in her seat, staring intently at the debris. There was no sign of life out there, and she felt no malevolent mind probing. For a moment she let herself relax sighing with relief. Then she remembered Troy...

Hastily grabbing a first aid kit from a locker, Marina rushed back to her cabin. She hesitated at the door. What if Troy attacked her again? She shrugged — what if he did? She knew he hadn't meant her any harm, and now the real danger was over. She opened the door...

-----

In Fireball XL5's navigation bay Venus was relieved to hear Steve's voice over the radio. "Won't be long now Venus. Matt's almost seen enough of these ships. We're about to return to Fireball."

"Okay Steve. Continuing to scan. So far nothing but debris."

Matt was carefully examining some wiring in an exposed part of the outer hull of the alien ship. Steve steered his thruster pack over to join him, "Found something interesting Professor?"

"I'm not sure... But I think..." Matt took the ray gun from his belt and adjusted the setting.

"Why the gun, Matt?"

"I'll need to cut a piece of this material to take back to the lab."

While Matt worked, Steve glanced back over at the two Fireball ships. "Matt!" he suddenly shouted urgently, "XL1 — she's firing her retros!"

Fireball XL1 was slowly moving backwards, drawing away from XL5.

"Steve!" Matt exclaimed, "It must be Mahoney!"

"This is going to hurt you more than me Zodiac." Mahoney gloated over the radio, "A whole lot more."

Steve spoke urgently, "Venus, Get up to the controls, fire main boosters! Evasive! Quickly!"

"Tell me, Colonel, how fast do you think that doctor of yours can run?"

"He's still got three missiles." Matt said worriedly, "He's backing XL1 out of the blast range."

"That I am Professor. Don't want to damage Space Patrol property now, do I?"

Missile racks began to extend from hatches in XL1's hull.

"Let's see now... Ten... Nine... Eight.... Seven..."

Breathlessly Venus rushed into XL5's main control cabin and flung herself into the pilot's seat, as over the radio Mahoney continued his countdown, "Three... Two... One... Zero and go!"

Fireball XL5's main engines fired just as the interceptor missile streaked forward on a plume of white smoke. The missile narrowly missed XL5 as the ship banked to starboard.

Venus gripped the controls of XL5 tightly as she flung the ship into a dive.

"I won't miss a second time Doctor Venus." Mahoney taunted over the open radio channel. "Don't worry Colonel, once I've taken care of your beautiful Doctor of Space Medicine, I'll be back to take care of you!"

"Don't be a fool!" Steve responded, "Give yourself up!"

"No thank you Colonel Zodiac. I don't want to end my life on the Prison Planet. Once you and your friends are out of the way I can return to Earth — as a hero!"

"If the rest of those Aquaphibian ships aren't stopped there'll be no Earth to return to!"

"Ah, and in that event I'll still be on the winning side Zodiac. Heads I win, tails you lose."

"Matt! Venus isn't trained for space combat — Mahoney is. She won't have a chance! We've got to do something!"

Matt clenched his fists as he watched the two ships disappear, "We can't do a thing Steve there's no power, the reactors are dead."

"That's right Doctor..." Mahoney jeered over the open radio channel, "Your boyfriend can't help you. But don't worry, I'll take care of you..."

Venus made no attempt to reply as she struggled to evade her pursuer. She tensed when she heard a high-pitched whine and a red warning light flashed on her console — incoming missile... Desperately Venus pulled back on the controls, lifting Fireball's nose up and causing the ship to loop back the way it had come. The interceptor altered course, relentlessly homing in on its quarry.

Steve heard the tell-tale warning sound over his radio. "Venus!" he yelled into his communicator, "Enemy missile lock! Engage ECM! Now!"

Venus obeyed the order almost without thinking as she leaned forward in her seat and toggled the missile jamming frequencies. The warning light winked out and she immediately threw XL5 into another tight turn.

In XL1's central control dome Mahoney cursed as he watched his missile lose its tracking and shoot off into space. Now there was only one missile left. "You won't dodge the next missile Doctor. I'll get real close before I fire. Say goodbye to your pretty girlfriend, Zodiac."

Mahoney was rapidly gaining on XL5, matching all of Venus's evasive manoeuvres with contemptuous ease. Smoothly bringing XL1 close behind the fleeing ship, he primed the last interceptor missile for firing, "Okay Doctor Venus, time's up. Now you die!"

"They're coming back!" Matt shouted as the two ships came into sight. Steve and Matt watched in horror as the ships hurtled towards them.

Up ahead of her, Venus could see the three huge alien ships. She had to turn again. If she was going to die she'd not endanger Steve and Matt. She slammed on the retros so she could slow for the turn. To her horror she felt the ship lurch to one side. The starboard retros had failed...

Mahoney cursed as he saw XL5 swing around on its axis so that it was now travelling backwards. "What the devil!" he exclaimed as he realized he was dead in the other ship's sights. Fearing a nosecone launched missile, he fired XL1's retros, throwing the ship to one side. Seconds later it exploded as it plunged into the third huge alien vessel. There was no sound as the two ships were torn apart in a white hot ball of superheated gases and molten metal.

"Venus!" Steve called desperately into his radio as he shielded his eyes from the glare of the blazing inferno.

"Steve! Are you both okay?" came the worried reply, "I seem to have got into a spin. I'll have the ship under control in a moment and get back to you..."

A few minutes later, Venus was gingerly piloting XL5 back towards the two remaining alien spacecraft. Her mind was full of questions. There had been no time for Steve to brief her on all of the events that had taken place over these last few... Days? Months? She shook her head. She couldn't seem to remember much. Why had Sergeant Mahoney tried to kill her? And there was something else. She'd felt Mahoney's bitterness, felt his hatred. She knew it wasn't imagination. She'd felt it. That was so odd.

Now she was feeling something else. Resignation mixed with loneliness and despair. But why? Surely the immediate danger was over now.



## **Chapter 24**

### **Lost In Space**

Once a relieved Steve and Matt were back aboard XL5 Venus went back to the medical bay to check on Phones.

She switched on the intercom, "I think the Lieutenant is coming around Matt."

"I'll come right away."

"No Matt, it's okay, I can handle it."

"Steve was mighty worried about some kind of mind control..."

"I know Matt, but I'm the doctor."

"Right enough Venus. Holler if you need me."

Phones opened his eyes wide, "Doctor Venus? Where am I?"

"You are aboard Fireball XL5 Lieutenant."

"My head feels like it's on fire..."

"Coma stun I'm afraid. If it's any consolation, I've just come out of a coma too."

Venus unfastened the restraining straps. "How do you feel, aside from the head ache?"

"Okay, I guess. But I don't remember... Oh, the Aquaphibians... We were heading for Titanica to get you out of there... say, what happened to Troy and Marina?"

"It's all right Phones. They're in Stingray."

“But what happened?”

“I’m afraid I’m not the right person to ask, we both need answers to a lot of questions.”

“And,” Phones added thoughtfully, “I think I need a shower and a change of clothes...”

-----

Colonel Zodiac didn’t have all the answers either. He did his best to bring Venus and Phones up to date on what he knew.

“I’d better get back to Stingray Colonel. Captain Tempest might need me.”

“I’m sorry Lieutenant, my priority is to warn Earth. Once the Professor has made the repairs we have to be underway immediately. Once we’ve got through to Space City, we’ll head back to check on Stingray as soon as we can.”

-----

Marina cautiously entered her cabin on board Stingray and found Troy Tempest still lying sprawled across her bed as a result of the blow to the head she had dealt him.

She wiped away the blood on his forehead with a cleansing cloth from the first aid kit as he slowly regained his senses.

The amorous desires that had overwhelmed him were gone now and he realised what he had tried to do.

Marina did her best to assure him that everything was okay now.

She led him up to the control area and pointed out of the view ports at the entrance to the cavern where they had found the Teufel-like fish. Then she pointed at the sting missile firing controls.

Troy could see the cavern entrance was now completely blocked by fallen rubble and that most of the supersub's sting missiles had been fired.

"Thank goodness you destroyed that fish Marina. It must have taken over my mind again. I'm so sorry for ... for what I almost did to you"

The feeling of shame was so overwhelming that tears came into his eyes and sobs wracked his body.

Marina understood and reached out to her Captain.

She held him close to her until the sobs subsided.

-----

Steve Zodiac entered the navigation bay

"How'd it go Matt?"

"We've repaired the starboard retro unit Steve. It should hold out until we can get it replaced. I've sent Robert back up to the main control cabin."

"Good work Matt. Can you give me a course out of this radiation so we can get a message to Earth?"

"I've got that figured out. We'll have to take as direct a route to Earth as we can. We've burned up most of our fuel reserves. We don't want to wind up stranded out in space."

Steve reached over Matt's circular desk and switched on the intercom, "Venus? Repairs complete. We'll be underway in a few minutes."

"Wait Steve!" Venus replied urgently from the medical lab.

"Venus?"

"We can't leave the area Steve... Not yet."

-----

Venus and Phones were busy packing medical equipment when Steve arrived at the lab. .

"What's the problem Venus?"

"Lieutenant Ninety is out there Steve."

"You mean you think he's still alive? But Venus, we've tried everything with Fireball's scanners... There's too much radiation to detect anything out there now".

"No Steve, you don't understand. I mean I know that he's still alive. He was thrown clear by the ejection system."

"Uh, but how do you know?"

"It's this device... Thing. I'm picking up some of his thoughts."

"Venus? Are you saying you can read thoughts?"

"Yes, that is, not exactly. More kind of emotions."

"Venus you've been through a lot, we all have. I know how you feel about losing Ninety but we have to get out of here and warn Earth."

Venus shook her head emphatically, "No Steve, I know how you feel, I really do. I know what I'm saying. Yes you must get out of the area, warn Earth, but let me take Fireball Junior. I'll find him, I know I can."

"But Venus, none of the space scanners are working. The astroscope couldn't even pinpoint where XL1 Junior was destroyed."

"Yes, I know, the radiation. But," Venus tapped the back of her neck, "I think that I have another way of finding him."

-----

"All systems check green Steve. We are ready to go."

"Good luck Venus, Phones. Once you've detached Junior you'll be out of radio contact. We'll be back to pick you up in a few hours... If we can find you."

"Don't worry Steve, I think we'll be able to get back to you. Take care of Zoonie for me won't you?"

"And you take care Venus," Matt said worriedly, "you sure are putting an awful lot of trust into... Whatever it is you're relying on."

"We are all in a risky job, Professor, and it's our job to save lives."

-----

Sometime later Venus cut Fireball Junior's motors.

"This is the place," Venus said excitedly, "I'm sure of it."

Phones leaned forward in the co-pilot's seat and stared out into the dark void, "But where do you suppose he is Doctor? I can't see anything out there but stars."

Venus fired the retros, "All I know is, he's seen us."

Once Venus had brought Junior to a halt she activated free-float.

"Wait here Phones, I'm going out to see if I can find Lieutenant Ninety."

"Shouldn't I come with you Venus, you might need help."

"Can you use a thruster pack?"

"Er, no, I guess not."

"Then I'm afraid you'd better stay here."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll make sure all the medical equipment is ready for use. At least I'm all trained up as a field medic."

"Right now Phones," Venus said as she stood up, "that's the best help I could ask for."

Back in the jetmobile bay, Venus took a medical bag from a locker. As the doctor strapped the bag around her waist she also attached a compact oxygen cylinder. "When I get back we'll need the thermo blankets and cardio stimulator. I've already pre-set the hypos and..."

"Don't worry Venus I'll have it all ready," Phones assured her as he helped the doctor to put on her thruster pack.

Venus took an oxygen pill and headed for the airlock,

"Au revoir Phones. See you in a short while, I hope."

"I sure hope so too Venus. Good luck."

Venus shot Phones a quick smile before she disappeared into the airlock. The door hissed closed behind her.

Phones suddenly felt very, very alone.

Once clear of Junior Venus gently rotated herself in space, trying to locate the survivor. She was feeling hope now, mingled with apprehension. Not her feelings. Someone else's. She knew someone, or something, was out here — and she was being watched... Was it Ninety or was it something else? She kicked her legs and the thruster pack boosted her in what she hoped was the right direction.

After several minutes of fruitless searching, Venus frowned. She'd thought Ninety was somewhere near. But how near? She could feel the direction but not the distance. Had Matt been right? Had she placed too much faith in her new found ability?

She pressed on. Ninety was here, she could feel that she was much closer now. Her radio crackled. "Venus? Are you okay out there?"

"Yes Phones. Can you boost the signal, you are very faint."

"It's at maximum now. I've been trying to reach you."

Venus turned to look back at Fireball Junior but she couldn't see it...

---

She strained her eyes to locate Fireball Junior against the star field, but the constellations were so unfamiliar here.

As Venus looked she noticed a few more stars were starting to appear, and then, to her immense relief, the tiny shape of Fireball Junior came into view, very small and distant now. "Debris! Just a dark chunk of debris in the way..." she scolded herself. She'd almost forgotten there would be pieces of wreckage strewn about the area, drifting in random directions, just like Ninety was. The Lieutenant was probably moving quite rapidly away from her position due to being thrown clear of the exploding XL1 Junior.

Turning around once more Venus resumed her search for the young Lieutenant. After a short while she glimpsed a movement ahead of her. Fervently hoping that it was Ninety, she kicked her feet, urging her thruster pack forward.

Ninety was waving desperately. As Doctor Venus got closer, her oxygen pill's energy field enabled her to hear him.

"Hey, over here!"

"Don't worry Lieutenant! We'll soon be back aboard Fireball."

"Glad you stopped by Doctor. It's been a little lonely out here with no company."

"Are you in any pain?"

"I might have broken leg... Can't remember. Everything feels numb now. Cold. Very cold. You got any hot chocolate?"

"When did you last take an oxygen pill?"

"Can't say... A while ago I think. Feel kind of dopey... Sleepy. Does it matter?"

Venus wrenched the air cylinder from her belt, "Hold still Joe, I'll give you some oxygen. Then we're going back to my place..."

-----

In Fireball Junior, Phones was more than a little worried as he anxiously sat in the co-pilot's seat, staring out into endless space.

He turned sharply at the sound of a faint voice on the radio.

"Phones... Can you hear...? Can't... Found Ninety but..."

"Venus!" Phones struggled with the radio's controls, "Doctor Venus I'm losing your signal. Please repeat."

The radio fell silent again.

"Not so much as a carrier wave. Guess there's just too much radiation out there." Phones made his way back to the jetmobile bay, "Guess Venus is heading back, didn't like the sound of that 'but' though."

-----

Steve Zodiac tried in vain to boost the neutrons as he repeatedly tried to reach Earth, "Fireball XL5 to Space City, urgent... Come in Space City..."

Professor Matic called over the ship's intercom, "Steve. I think I've found it. Their Achilles heel..."

"I'm all ears Matt, What have you got?"

"That ship we looked over, it had nothing to produce any kind of force-field."

"And that's why Venus was able to get her missiles to hit?"

"Yes Steve. But originally it would have had a force-field just like all the other ships. I've discovered a network of semi-organic receptors embedded in that piece of hull. They act very like the way the cells in our bodies react with oxygen pills to generate a protective field, but millions of times more powerful. It must have relied on a local broadcasting of the energy field from a nearby generator ship. Lieutenant Ninety must have destroyed a



shield generator ship with his sacrifice. That then left several of its surrounding ships unprotected.

This suggests that the ships that project the nuclear retardant rays don't have enough power left to generate their own protective force fields"

"Matt, can the force-field generator ships be identified?"

"Yes, I've figured out their transmission frequency. We could use it as a homing beacon, but it's still going to be tough to overload their shields."

"I still can't get through to Space City Matt."

"Steve, we're gonna have to get further from the radiation field. If we don't warn Earth soon they won't have time to do anything to stop the attack."

-----  
World Space Patrol refuelling station Companion 18 was situated on the outer edge of the Solar System where things had been quiet for days — but that was about to change.

"Miguel!" a junior lieutenant snapped, "For Pete's sake put that guitar down will you?"

Miguel obediently stopped playing, "What's up Boss?"

"Get over here will you?" The officer was adjusting controls on a console, "Picking up a message. Listen."

The radio crackled as adjustments were made, but the message was still very faint, "XL5 to Space City... Come in Space City... Fireball XL5 to Space City, urgent. Please respond..."

"XL5? Isn't she the ship that disappeared a while ago?"

"Yup, and there's no way that ship is going to reach Space City with that lousy signal. Their neutroni transceiver must be real shot. I'd better try to contact them, see what their problem is."

"Okay Boss, I'll see if I can boost our transmitter."

"Companion 18 to Fireball XL5... Come in XL5..."

The faint message repeated a few more times and then the radio fell silent.

"It's no good Boss, done all I can. We're at max output. There must be a heck of a lot of neutroni interference out there."

"Thanks Mig. I'll try to triangulate their position, I guess that's the best we can do."



## **Chapter 25**

### **Desperate Measures**

On Fireball Junior, Phones waited for the airlock to re-pressurise. When the door finally opened, he saw Venus kneeling beside a uniformed man slumped against the bulkhead. "Doctor Venus... Is he...?"

"He passed out Phones. The Lieutenant is suffering from radiation exposure and oxygen deprivation."

"I'll go get the stretcher."

"No need..." Ninety mumbled, "I can walk... I think..."

"Sure you can fella," Phones said as he brought the stretcher over, "But why walk when you can ride?"

Ninety lapsed back into unconsciousness as Venus and Phones gently lifted him onto the stretcher.

In the jetmobile bay, Venus locked the stretcher into a static position as a makeshift hospital bed. Then she began treating Lieutenant Ninety's injuries while Phones ran tests through Fireball Junior's medical computer.

After about an hour Venus started putting away her medical equipment. "Well that's all we can do for now Phones. He's sleeping comfortably. He'll need hospital treatment for the radiation."

Phones nodded, "Let's hope the colonel gets back here soon... I'll get us a coffee."

Venus frowned as she closed up the lockers. She was starting to find it difficult to sense other people's emotions. With no radio contact how would she find Fireball?

-----

"Space City to Fireball XL23..."

"Zero here Lieutenant."

"Sir, we've picked up a faint signal from Fireball XL5. Too much interference for communication but Companion 18 was able to give us a position fix."

"Let's have it Lieutenant."

Drake relayed the coordinates.

Zero called through to the navigation bay, "Did you get that Jock?"

"Aye General, I did." said Chief Engineer Jock Campbell who Zero had seconded as his navigator

"Get us a course to that position."

"That'd be three one five zero white sir."

"Thanks Jock," Zero snapped on the ship to ship communications, "XL23 to Task Force, alter course. Three one five zero white. Repeat, three one five zero white. "

A handful of Fireball ships, together with their miscellaneous assortment of support craft, swung onto their new heading.

-----

"Fireball XL23 to Fireball XL5..."

Steve Zodiac was in central control, he almost jumped when he heard the call, "Fireball XL23, this is Fireball XL5, Zodiac here."

"About time. I've been calling you for the last half hour."

"Commander!"

"That's General, if you don't mind. What's the situation Steve?"

"We've been trying to reach you General. There's a fleet of huge alien vessels on their way to the Solar System with a nuclear retardant weapon that can knock out a sun."

"We had that figured. We're out hunting for them Steve. About nine hours from your position."

"But how did you know?"

"I guess we got lucky. But listen Steve, I've only got four other ships with me. What's your situation? Have you made contact with Fireball XL1? Ninety was out searching for you."

"We found Stingray and Doctor Venus. We engaged the enemy ships. Fireball XL1 was destroyed General. Ninety may have ejected, we're conducting a search. Those ships are protected by force-fields, your missiles won't get through. Professor Matic thinks he's got the answer..."

-----

The World President was addressing an emergency meeting he'd convened at World Security Council Headquarters, Unity City.

"Leaders of our world's many nations, this is the last time I shall require your attendance here. By the power invested in me accorded by this world — our Earth's Constitution — I hereby declare myself to be Commander-In-Chief of this entire planet. You are all relieved of your duties."

Surprisingly there was no uproar, not a raised voice of dissent.

The Commander-in-Chief of the entire planet continued, "I will bring to this world a new Golden Age. I will bring our enemies to their knees and we will take our rightful place as rulers of this Universe."

He turned as a man in a white coat came up behind him,

"I'm sure that will be very nice Mr. Bandranaik," said the softly-spoken man, "Now, if you'd just like to come along with me..."

Now there was a loud voice of dissent, “What is the meaning of this?! You can’t...” Two brawny medical orderlies held the ex-World President gently but firmly while the doctor administered a sedative.

“Sleep now, Mr. Bandranaik, you’re completely safe with us.”

The Vice President stepped into the room. She looked pale and drawn, “Leaders of the world’s nations, I thank you for your understanding, I am truly sorry that you had to witness this, but it was necessary that you all be here. Mr. Bandranaik will of course receive the best medical attention our doctors can muster. He has served us well as President of our Earth for over two decades. Now, as Vice President, I temporarily take on the mantle of acting World President. Elections will be held within the next six months. Until that time, let me assure you that I will strictly adhere to our world’s constitutions and treaties, both on land and in the oceans. My role is to serve and represent this world on behalf of the nation’s elected governments, not to rule over it. Now, gentlemen, ladies we have some very urgent business to conduct if we are to avert a global civil war with the undersea races.”

There was a collective murmur of approval from the national leaders.

The sun shone brightly through the windows as the acting World President sat down at the head of the table. She very much hoped that it would continue to shine.

-----

Steve and Professor Matic had spent the best part of three hours briefing General Zero and transmitting their data.

“Steve, we’ll be engaging those alien ships in a couple of hours. I want you to return to that water world and make sure this gets ended once and for all.”

“But General, once we’ve completed the search for Ninety we can join your task force.”

“The numbers don’t add up Steve and you know it. You’d be far too late to do anything. It’d all be over, one way or the other by the time you reached the area. See if the WASP sub was successful. If not, complete that mission. Then locate and destroy their shipyards. If Earth is destroyed those Aquaphibians aren’t gonna stop there. The whole of the United Planets will be at their mercy — and they don’t have any.”

“Understood sir.”

“Well, we can’t sit around jawing all day Colonel. We have jobs to do.”

“Yes sir, good luck sir.”

“You betcha Steve and good luck to your team too. Guess we’ll meet again on the other side...”

-----

Fireball XL5 had returned to the area of space where they’d left Doctor Venus and Phones. Steve was worried, he couldn’t locate Fireball Junior. The space scanners had blanked out again due to the radiation levels. It was like trying to see through an electronic fog, even though the stars were clearly visible.

“Hold present course and speed Robert,” he ordered, “I’m going below.”

Robert acknowledged by repeating the orders as Steve headed down the companionway.

Matt looked up from his desk as Steve entered the navigation bay.

“No luck Steve. I’ve been using the astroscope and spacemograph for signs of Fireball Junior but nothing so far. Not so much as a blip.”

“Venus was pretty confident she’d be able to find us Matt.”

"Yeah she sure was, but I'm not sure I share that confidence Steve. We know next to nothing about that alien technology she was relying on."

"There must be something we can do to find them?"

Matt shook his head, "Aside from retracing our flight path I doubt it Steve. The radiation levels are dropping but not fast enough."

-----

"I'm sorry Phones. I feel Steve is out there but I can't sense where he is. I think it's the radiation... I can't find them."

Phones stared at the instruments on the console, "Nothing on the scanners. Maybe they aren't back yet..."

"No... they are out there Phones, but they can't find us."

-----

General Zero's task force was speeding forwards to engage the oncoming alien ships at long range, leaving the supply ships far behind them.

The Fireball crews watched as their missiles exploded harmlessly before reaching their targets.

"It's no good, we can't even slow them!"

"We've got to weaken that force-field."

"XL16, out of missiles, dropping back to the freighters for more."

"We've got to destroy those generator ships and fast. We're running out of time and missiles."

"It's not working. We're hitting the field generator ships but not with enough force to knock them out. The shield strength picks up again before the next hit; even if the multiple strikes are only seconds apart." reported Jock from Fireball XL23's navigation bay.



"If we don't do some real damage soon those ships will pass us by and get a clear run to the Solar System," said Zero.

"General" called the XL7 skipper over the radio "Requesting permission to ram."

"Permission denied Ross. Listen up all of you; nobody and I mean nobody, rams any of those ships, unless I do it first. Is that clear?" replied Zero.

"But sir, if..."

"This is not a debating society! I'm giving you a direct order! We have only a short amount of time to stop those ships. Task Force return to supply line, space velocity five and get the Hell off my radio, all of you, I need to think." ordered Zero

"Ross could be right General..."

"I know it Jock, and don't give me that 'they all know the risks' patter. I know that more than anyone here."

-----

Steve Zodiac was deep in thought as he made his way back to central control. He suddenly turned on his heel when he remembered he hadn't fed Zoonie. One of the last things Venus had said was to look after her lazoon.

Steve opened the lounge door, "Zoonie?" there was no sign of the lazoon.

The Colonel was in no mood for a game of hide and seek. Where was he?

Venus kept Zoonie's food in the medical lab, but Steve drew another blank there. He was just about to leave when he heard a whimpering sound from the medical bay.

Zoonie was sitting mournfully beside the bed that Venus had recently occupied whilst in her coma.

Steve put a hand on the lazoon's shoulder, "We'll find Venus... Somehow."

At the sound of Venus's name Zoonie began to howl.

"Easy... Easy..." Steve said as he tried to calm the animal. "Let's get you some food boy."

As Steve watched the lazoos eating, a thought occurred to him. He flicked on the intercom, "Matt I'm getting a thruster pack and going outside with Zoonie..."

"Steve?"

"Ninety brought Zoonie along to help find Venus. I think he might help Venus find us!"

"What do you have in mind Steve?"

"I'm thinking Zoonie might be able to provide Venus with a telepathic beacon..."

-----

The Lady Ann touched down on Zofeit at Chen Industries private space port three days after Twenty One's dinner date with the industrialist.

Three armed Aquaphibians approached the Lady Ann as the airlock opened and the boarding ramp was lowered.

Suddenly they were cut down by lethal laser beams fired from somewhere on the outer hull of the space yacht.

Two more Aquaphibians ran towards the Lady Ann from the Space Port Control Building but were also shot down before they could raise their weapons.

"What have you done" screamed Chen standing with Twenty One in the space yacht's airlock ready to disembark along with the pilot and navigator. He realized that the USS agent had somehow killed his alien allies.

“Oh one of my charming little deadly toys is on the hull of this ship and I have just instructed it to kill anything with green scaly skin that comes within range.”

Chen felt control of the situation slipping away from him as he pulled a ray gun from his shoulder holster and aimed it at Twenty One.

Twenty One disarmed Chen with a vicious karate chop and then launched a drop kick at the industrialist which sent him flying out of the airlock to land in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the boarding ramp.

The USS agent turned to the pilot and navigator who were all that was left of the passengers and crew — both were dumb struck at the events that were occurring around them.

“Can you get this ship up into orbit before any more of Chen’s friends arrive?”

“Yes sir,” said Frank Archer. “The auto-pilot shut down when we landed. We’ve got full control again.”

“What were those creatures?” asked Dave Freeman the navigator.

“No time for explanations. Just get this ship back into space” ordered the USS agent curtly.

Ten minutes later the Lady Ann was in geostationary orbit around Zofeit on the opposite side of the planet to Chen Industries Space Port.

Twenty One sat in the navigator’s seat next to Archer and switched on the neutroni radio setting it for a coded transmission. Now they were back in charted space they could contact Space City — as long as the Solar System had not already been destroyed.

He hoped the WSP had received his previous coded message and been able to send ships to stop the Aquaphibian fleet in time.

"Calling Space City. Calling Space City. This is USS Agent Twenty One calling Space City. The ships attacking the Solar System are being manufactured by Chen Industries on Zofeit for a race of alien Aquaphibians. The automated construction site is somewhere beneath one of Zofeit's oceans. I need you to send a combat sub to help me find and destroy it."

-----

The task force slowed as they approached the ragged line of tankers and freighters.

"Jock, could you rig some of those supply ships for automated flight control?" questioned Zero

"Aye, that I could General. It'd take about a week... On the other hand, if I'm right in what I think you're wanting, I could rig something else."

"I want unmanned ships, packed with fuel and explosives..."

"Aye, you're wanting some fire ships. You get 'em loaded up and I'll arrange the deliveries."

-----

As the Aquaphibian attack fleet drew ever closer, the Space Patrol crews worked feverishly to attach multiple interceptor missile warheads and high explosives to the external frameworks of the six fuel tankers.

"How's the delivery system going Jock?"

"I'm all done General. Deployment is all hooked up to the interceptor launch computers on all Fireballs. The procedure's the same excepting for those wee red fire buttons I've taped to the pilot consoles."

-----

Having both taken oxygen pills Steve Zodiac floated alongside Fireball, holding Zoonie in his arms.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Steve called out loudly, “Venus!”

To Steve’s relief, Zoonie began to howl at the sound of her name.

“Steve!” Matt called urgently over the radio, “scanners are picking up something moving this way.”

“Venus?”

“Can’t say yet Steve. You’d better get back inside, no telling what’s coming our way, might be more Aquaphibians.”

“Not yet Matt. This has to work!”

After a few minutes Zoonie stopped howling and began talking, “Howdy folks... Howdy... Professor put the kettle on.”

“You’ve done it Steve. It’s Fireball Junior right enough.”

“I didn’t do a thing Matt, it’s all down to Zoonie and Venus. We’re coming back aboard.”

-----

Five Fireball patrol ships slowly accelerated away to resume combat. Beneath each ship hung a fuel tanker, held securely by magnetic clamps. Behind them half a dozen recently upgraded Light Patrol craft followed at a respectful distance.

"Keep those ships moving smooth and steady," Zero called over the neutroni, "you're riding on tons of explosives. As soon as you're in range, lock on to your designated target. Light Patrol ships, keep formation until a shield ship is down then pick your own nearby targets — concentrate your fire on their engines."

As they got closer to the oncoming alien fleet the Fireball ships began to fan out, each homing in on a different shield generator ship.

At the controls of XL23 Zero flicked on his radio again, "Zero to Task Force... Attention all ships. Right now the Aquaphibians think we can't touch them. We'll get one chance before they get wise to what we are doing. Commence your attack runs now and make those tankers count!"

Fireball XL23 streaked towards the leading ships, the ungainly tanker still slung beneath its hull.

Jock Campbell called through from the navigation bay, "General, still on course. Ten seconds to firing."

"Standing by to correct course Jock."

As Jock counted down the seconds, Zero kept his eyes on the course and his finger on the red button. He could see the alien ships now, cold grey dots against the even colder black of space.

"Two... one... zero and go!" Jock called over the intercom.

Zero pressed the button. The tankers main motors fired and a second later he saw the tanker surge forward, quickly disappearing into the distance. Suddenly there was a searing glare, directly ahead.

"Jock?"

"Shield ship destroyed General! Stand by, I'll have some unprotected targets for you."

-----

"There she is!" Venus exclaimed with relief when she saw the familiar shape of Fireball XL5's Main Body coming into view.

Beside her in the co-pilot's seat Phones smiled with relief, "Boy! That ship of yours sure is a sight for sore eyes Venus."

"I'll see if I can call them up now..." Venus switched on the neutroni, "Fireball Junior to XL5 can you hear me?"

Steve answered immediately, "Fireball to Junior, reading you clearly Venus. Standing by to reconnect."

"Steve, Phones and I found Lieutenant Ninety. He's going to be okay. He's sedated but comfortable."

"Well done Venus, Phones. It'll be great to have you all back aboard."

Steve watched Junior from central control as it gracefully swung around in front of Fireball. "That's boss flying Venus. Okay, lock Junior on free float and we'll do the rest. Reconnect in thirty seconds."

-----

Fireball XL5 was soon underway and speeding back towards the water world where they'd left Stingray.

Steve and Matt were sitting in the lounge and taking a break.

"I have a feeling we won't find any ship yards in that solar system Steve."

"Why's that Professor?"

"There was something mighty peculiar about those Aquaphibian spacecraft."

"Something fishy you mean?"

"The exact opposite. They didn't look at all fishy. Now I didn't have much time to examine the wrecks but it strikes me they were not made by fishmen. They were made by humans."

"But how can you tell Matt? One spaceship looks much the same as another. They have the same basic functions."

"Sure, but the control panels were pretty standard for human operation. Designed for human hands. The seats were smaller than you would think for those Space Aquaphibians. And then there's the construction. Seems to me it followed the way we build our ships."

---

“I’m not sure that would be enough for Commander Zero.” said Steve.

“Nope, it wouldn’t. When we get into the system I can do a thorough scan for any sign of industrial activity.”

-----

Fireball XL3’s missile laden fuel tanker was the next to hit its target.

Another alien Shield Generator ship was destroyed in a blinding release of deadly nuclear energy.

Fireball XL7’s and Fireball XL16’s weaponized fuel tankers were even more successful as the combined detonations of their targets caused a massive chain reaction that not only destroyed two Shield Generator ships but four nearby Ray Projector ships as well.

Fireball XL2 destroyed a fifth Shield Generator ship with her deadly payload and Captain Ken Johnson whooped with delight as he turned his ship to start targeting the nearby now unshielded Projector ships with interceptor missiles

There were still two more Shield Generator ships to destroy and only one fuel tanker left in the Task Force.

“Jock. We’ve got to knock out those last two Generator ships” called Space General Zero over the intercom as he pulled Fireball XL23 away from the Ray Projector ships they had just disabled now they were no longer protected from attack.

He switched the intercom to ship to ship and selected Fireball XL3’s frequency

“Turner. Grab the last tanker and take out the nearest Shield ship. We will take care of the last one”



The XL3 skipper swung his ship around to follow orders with a worried expression on his face. What was General Zero planning? Was he going to try and ram the ship?

“Jock. You know what we’ve got to do” said Zero into the intercom of XL23  
“Aye General, that I do” replied Space City’s Chief Engineer from the navigation bay, cold sweat beginning to run down his back.

Zero changed course and headed for the Shield Generator ship that was at the rear of the alien fleet.

“Priming all natomic warheads. Preparing to release magnetic locks” said Zero into the intercom. “Jock as soon as Junior is free pull XL23 away and continue attacking the unprotected Projector ships. That is an order”.

“It’s been an honour serving with you Wilbur” said Jock with a lump in his throat

Then Jock noticed the readings on his astroscope.

“General. Turner has just destroyed his target. There is only our shield ship left now — and its power levels are goin’ off the scale. I think it’s trying to extent its force field to protect the remaining Projector ships from attack.

It’s reactor canna take the strain. It’s gonna blow. Pull back Wilbur. Pull back or we’ll be caught in the blast”.

General Zero pulled XL23 away from the final Shield Generator ship just in time

The giant alien vessel began to glow before exploding in a violent burst of natomic energy that destroyed six of the nearest Projector ships along with it.

Zero switched on the intercom

“Jock. Do not tell Eleanor what I almost did. And that is also an order”

“Aye General. And if you need a Navigator for another emergency mission I would appreciate it if you could choose someone else. I don’t think my heart would stand another day like this one”

The remaining twelve unprotected Nuclear Retardant Ray Projector ships were soon disabled by the combined Fireball and Light Patrol ships

The WSP task force had survived without casualty. The immediate threat to the Solar System was finally over.

-----

Steve Zodiac watched from the pilot’s seat as the deep blue planet ahead grew larger.

XL5 had just received the good news that General Zero’s Task Force had destroyed the Aquaphibian fleet heading towards the Solar System.

It was now vital that their shipyards be destroyed as well.

He switched on the intercom, “Matt, Venus, we’re approaching the water world. We’ll be there in about five minutes.”

“Robert’s already in central control Steve.”

“Venus, we’ll go down in Junior the minute we’re in orbit.”

“Okay Steve. I’ve prepared the medical bay in case it’s needed, I’ll come up right away.”

“Matt, any chance of picking up Stingray on the astroscope?”

“Sure Steve, if she’s on the near side of the planet I should be able to get a fix.” The Professor made careful adjustments to his instruments. “Yeah... picking up something... Think I’ve got it Steve. Let’s see... Yeah, I’ve got a fix... the sub is on the surface, smack in the middle of the day side of the planet.”

“How does she look Matt?” Steve asked apprehensively.

---

“Ah... let’s see... yeah... yeah, I think I’d say she’s in good shape all right...”  
Matt piped the image from his console through to Steve’s central viewer.

Steve smiled when he saw the image, “See what you mean Matt...”

On his screen Steve could clearly see Stingray floating on a blue ocean, and on the deck, there was Marina, reclining in the sun with her head resting on Captain Tempest’s bare chest.

Steve turned in his seat as Venus entered the control cabin, “Matt has located Stingray...”

Venus glanced at the central viewer as she took her place in the co-pilots seat, “Oh, It certainly looks like Captain Tempest has been successful...”

“Yeah, sure looks like it. I’ll give them a call so they know they’ve got visitors.”

-----

Soon Fireball Junior was heading down to the water world while the main body of Fireball remained in orbit.

In the navigation bay Professor Matic prepared to use Fireball’s sophisticated scanning equipment to study the planet. He pressed a button on his desk and it swung around to face a display screen on the wall. Then he spoke into the intercom, “Robert, change to orbital trajectory three one five zero green.”

Up in central control the robot acknowledged, and fired retro rockets to change course to put the ship on to a new heading.

The Professor was already convinced there were no ship yards here but he had to make a thorough survey.

-----

Troy Tempest was back in uniform when Fireball Junior landed in the sea close to Stingray. He and Marina were soon readying their monocoverters, in a compartment located in Stingray's bows. The monocoverters combined a single seat with an anti-grav unit and small, low powered thrusters. The WASP version of an old fashioned boatswain's chair. Used primarily for getting from one sea vessel to another.

Troy triggered the hatch above and bright sunlight flooded into the compartment as it opened.

"Are you ready Marina?"

Marina smiled and nodded, her hands resting lightly on the controls.

"Okay, let's go." The two monocoverters rose vertically up out of the hatch and were soon hovering several metres above Stingray. Troy and Marina adjusted their controls and began moving smoothly over the calm blue sea towards Fireball Junior's open hatch.

-----

Once aboard Fireball Junior Troy updated Steve and Venus on how Marina had destroyed the alien mind controlling fish after he had tripped and knocked himself out.

Venus spotted the cut on Troy's forehead and reached for her medical bag

"Ouch!" Troy exclaimed as Venus applied a dermal spray to the wound, "I mean, thanks Doctor."

"It'll heal completely in a day or two Captain."

"Thanks, silly of me to trip like that..."

Venus couldn't help noticing the meaningful look Troy gave Marina. Something had happened, though she wasn't sure quite what. For some reason she found herself thinking of the translator gadget Marina had used back in Marineville.

---

“Yes,” Venus said suddenly as she realized that she’d been staring at Marina, “I think you should watch your step Captain...”

Troy and Marina were relieved to hear that the Aquaphibian fleet had been defeated by Zero’s task force and that the threat to the Solar System was now over.

Troy was adamant that he would stay with Stingray on the water world until she was collected by the WSP

“OK Captain if you’re sure...” Steve said uncertainly.

“Yes, I figure that’s the best thing Colonel. Stingray is my responsibility and I want to stay aboard.”

Steve nodded, “Guess I’d feel the same way about Fireball, Captain.”

“I’ll wait here for the freighter to come and pick Stingray up; it’ll only be a few days.”

Marina moved over to stand close to Troy in Fireball Junior’s jetmobile bay, her bare feet making no sound as she walked.

“Anything you’d like us to leave you Captain?” Venus asked.

“I’ve got all I need thanks Doctor. Phones can give Commander Shore my report when he gets back to Earth.”

“How about you Marina?” Steve asked, “Are you coming back with us?”

Marina shook her head emphatically and gazed at Troy.

Venus gave Steve’s arm a discrete tug.

-----

“This is Johnny Jackson with the latest news. The World President, Nikita Bandranaik, has resigned. The announcement was made soon after the former World President was taken suddenly ill. We understand that his

condition is 'comfortable' and he is receiving the best possible medical care. The nature of Mr Bandranaik's illness has not yet been disclosed. But reliable sources suggest a nervous breakdown. Vanessa Copeland, former Vice World President is now acting World President. Ms. Copeland has promised that there will be elections in a few months' time. Meanwhile, Commander Samuel Shore, renowned head of the World Aquanaut Security Patrol, has been cleared of all charges and will be resuming his duties at Marineville upon his return from the prison planet, Conva."

-----

Atlanta Shore watched with Captain Jordan as the sleek delta winged spacecraft descended to the landing area at Space City on a huge cloud of white smoke.

Commander Sam Shore was soon guiding his hover chair down the boarding ramp and across the landing pad to join his daughter.

"If I ever commit treason again Atlanta, I think I would prefer to be shot than sent to Conva."said Shore.

"Oh Father, it must have been dreadful."

"Well let's just say I've had my fill of watching TV and old movies. As for the food..."

Atlanta laughed, "You'll be home in two hours and dinner is in the oven."

"I read your report Lieutenant, and that of your commanding officer. Atlanta, I'm proud of you."

"Commander Shore, we have a WASP jet waiting to fly you back to Marineville." said Jordan.

"Captain Jordan, I once said some harsh words to you. I was wrong. Will you accept my apology?"

"But of course Commander. The affair is already forgotten, I assure you"

---

“Good.” Atlanta said firmly, “Then you must join us both for dinner tomorrow night Jaques.”

Commander Shore smiled, “From the tone Captain, I’d say Atlanta has just given you a direct order.”

“Oui Commander. An order I am most ‘appy to obey!”

-----

Steve Zodiac sat at the controls of Fireball XL5. It felt good to be on their way home at last knowing that the Solar System was safe and his crew were back together again.

If he had lost Venus... well it did not bear thinking about.

He reached over to the console beside him and opened the intercom to the ship’s lounge.

“Phones, now we’re in neutroni range of Earth, do you want me to pipe you through to Marineville?”

“Thanks Colonel. I guess they’ll be wanting to know where we’ve been all this time.”

A few minutes later the gruff tones of the WASP chief responded to his call.

“This is Commander Shore. It’s very nice of you to finally report in Phones. You do realise that you were all logged as missing in action? The World Space Patrol said they’d found you but it seems they were too busy to give details.”

“I guess we were abducted by aliens Commander. It’s a long story, but Troy and Marina are safe; they’re looking after Stingray. And we rescued Doctor Venus. ”

“And just where is Stingray Phones?”

“She’s on Planet 4, stellar system 53, Sector 29, sir. I’ll be back at Marineville in two days, Sir. Troy...”

“Hold it Phones, Atlanta wants to speak to you.”

“Phones we’d thought you were all dead!” exclaimed Atlanta excitedly.

“Easy Atlanta, we’re all fine.” said Phones

“Did you say Troy is on a planet somewhere?”

“That’s right Atlanta... he stayed with Stingray. A WSP freighter will make a pick up in a couple of weeks.”

“A couple of weeks? Poor Troy. How’s Marina? Is she with you on the spaceship?”

“Er no Atlanta, She, er, she stayed to help Troy.”

“She’s helping Troy? I see.”

“I guess Marina wanted to stay to keep Troy company — there’s nothing there but ocean.”

“Why didn’t you stay with Troy instead?”

“Troy said I didn’t need to hang around.”

“I see.”

-----

Space Freighter SF7 had collected Stingray and its crew from the water world sooner than expected and was now on its way back to Earth.

Troy and Marina were surprised to hear Stingray was the second WASP supersub the Space Freighter had transported recently but before Troy could ask the pilot for more details they were interrupted by an incoming neutroni radio message.



“This is acting Commander Anderson of Space City calling Freighter SF7. Come in please, over”

“SF7 receiving you loud and clear Space City, over” responded Freighter Pilot Jim Malone formally. “What can I do for you Commander?”

“You are to divert to Zofeit at maximum speed. Repeat you are to divert to Zofeit at maximum speed. Stingray has been seconded by a USS agent to carry out a seek-and-destroy mission there. You are to wait in orbit until the mission has been completed and then bring them all home. Is that clear Pilot Malone?”

“Very clear Commander. Over and out”

“Here we go again” said Troy to Marina. They had both been listening in to the radio conversation

-----

SF7 arrived in orbit around Zofeit just over a day later and went into geostationary orbit alongside the Lady Ann.

USS Agent Twenty One crossed over to the Space Freighter by thruster pack and joined the Stingray crew. He explained the mission to Troy.

Even though the Aquaphibian fleet had been defeated by Zero’s task force it was vital they find and destroy Chen’s undersea automated construction site to stop the aliens being re-equipped and trying again.

The SF7 now left the Lady Ann in orbit and descended down to the surface of Zofeit where she hovered in free float over a calm sea.

They were just over the horizon from the coastal region where the Space Port was located and hopefully would not be detected if there was any one still alive there.

The Space Freighter lowered Stingray into the alien seaweed infested waters and within minutes the supersub was heading off on its mission to destroy Chen Industries undersea space sub construction site

Troy and Marina sat at the controls while Agent Twenty One stood between them peering through the enhanced view ports.

The USS Agent had suggested the construction site must be under the sea bed somewhere near to the Space Port for ease of raw material deliveries.

He also told them that the Zofeit civilisation had used geothermal heat to generate electricity which explained why they had located their factories and power plants beneath their planet's ocean floors. On his last visit to Zofeit he had been given a guided tour of many of the planet's subsea industrial sites so knew the most likely areas to search.

Troy set Stingray's sensors to detect any energy signatures — particularly ones similar to the alien space sub that had originally abducted them from Earth and taken them to the water world.

Marina listened intently to the hydrophones for any nearby movements.

Chen had told Twenty One that the undersea construction site was fully automated but there could be Aquaphibians guarding it.

-----

Six hours later and Stingray had covered and recovered the coastal area within a fifteen mile radius of the Space Port and found nothing. Twenty One began to wonder whether they needed to extend their search area when Marina began waving her arms around and pointing through the main view ports directly ahead of their current direction.

Troy quickly cut power and set Stingray down on the seabed.

All remaining sting missiles were primed and ready.

Minutes later a fish like submarine similar in design but larger than Titan's mechanical fish appeared in the view screens and sailed past them without giving any indication they had spotted the WASP supersub.

"Follow that sub Captain Tempest" ordered Twenty One. "But keep your distance."

Thirty minutes later and some fifty miles from the coast Stingray began to detect energy readings emanating from the sea bed nearby that climbed rapidly and were soon off the scale of the supersub's sensors.

"This must be our target" said Troy. "Fire all sting missiles at the centre of that energy reading Marina, before they detect us"

Eight sting missiles shot from Stingray's port and starboard tubes and homed in on the automated construction site.

Troy cut power and settled Stingray on the sea bed from where they watched the tremendous underwater explosions that completely destroyed Chen's construction site.

"Congratulations on a job well done, Captain" said USS Agent Twenty One.

Suddenly Marina began frantically tapping her hydrophones head set and pointing out of the port view screens. The Aquaphibians submarine had survived the explosions and was heading in their direction — but they had no sting missiles left.

Troy gunned Stingray's motors and they were soon heading away from the ruins of the construction site with the Aquaphibian submarine in hot pursuit.

"Rate Six and they're still gaining on us" said Troy, any hopes of outrunning the enemy rapidly fading.

He directed the supersub further away from the coast towards deeper waters while hogging the seabed and trying to take advantage of any cover available.

“They’re faster than us but let’s hope Stingray is more manoeuvrable” said Troy through gritted teeth.

Marina made hand movement that Troy understood to mean torpedoes had been fired.

Nearby explosions rocked Stingray as Troy continually weaved in and out of the rock formations on the sea bed to make them a harder target. Then he saw a narrow ravine opening up below them and dived down towards it. It was their only chance.

At the last minute Troy rolled Stingray by 90 degrees and entered the ravine side on, praying that it was too narrow for the fishlike submarine to follow.

The Aquaphibian pilot realized it’s mistake too late to change course. The alien submarine became wedged between the rocky walls of the narrow ravine and disintegrated in a tremendous explosion.

Troy pulled Stingray up out of the ravine and headed for the surface.

Marina gave an all clear sign and Troy checked for any further power readings. Thankfully there were none.

“Give me advance warning if you intend to try that manoeuvre again while I’m on board” said Twenty One picking himself up from the deck where he had fallen. “I’ll make sure I’m sitting down and strapped in.”

“And remind me not to use all of our remaining sting missiles in a single strike leaving us defenceless” added Troy

Marina nodded her head vigorously in agreement.

“Okay, mission accomplished” said Twenty One. “Let’s call that Space Freighter to pick us up and head back to Earth. We’ll take the Lady Ann with us in tow for WSP investigators to check over when we get back.”

-----

General Zero's victorious Task Force returned to Space City to a hero's welcome although the news of the Space Aquaphibians attack on the Solar System was kept from the public to avoid panic.

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Fireball XL5 touched down at Space City the following day. Lieutenant Ninety was immediately taken to the Control Tower's medical wing where he would eventually make a full recovery and be ready to receive the WSP's highest award for bravery.

The XL5 crew and Phones were subjected to intensive debriefing sessions with WSP Security followed by full medical examinations during which the alien device was surgically removed from Venus's neck.

After almost a week in isolation wards they were finally given clearance to return to duty.

-----

That evening Steve Zodiac sat next to Venus in the lounge of her beach house watching the World News on TV.

"This is Johnny Jackson with the latest news. Following last week's shocking announcement about World President Bandranaik's resignation one of his closest allies Admiral Washington Beatty has been arrested for ..."

Steve picked up the remote and switched off the TV.

He had not felt this relaxed in months

"Did that alien device in your neck enabled you to read people's minds?"

"I suppose you could say that Steve." said Venus. "But really all I 'got' was vague impressions, feelings, that I knew were not my own. They did some tests here at Space City before they removed it. They were inconclusive. The device was damaged beyond repair during the surgical process to remove it. I was considered more important...."

"You mean the tests didn't prove some kind of telepathy?"

"No Steve. I guess nobody is really aware of what they are thinking at any particular time. We only 'think' we do. There's an awful lot going on in our heads, most of it occurring in the subconscious. I guess it would best be described as 'empathic' rather than 'telepathic'. I could feel other people's strong emotions. Or, at least I thought I could. It may have been just imagination or me picking up subtle body language clues. Anyway, I'm glad to be rid of the darn thing."

"Did you pick up anything from me?"

Venus hesitated, "I couldn't say Steve. As I said, it could have been pure imagination on my part. I thought I picked up sheer naked hatred from Mahoney when he tried to kill us all. But then, what else would someone imagine under the circumstances? It all has to be filed under 'subjective'. The para-psychologists will be running statistical checks on it for decades but I doubt they'll furnish any 'proof' that anything really happened. Anyway less talk about me."

Venus leaned forward and picked up a folder from her coffee table.

"I have your medical report here Steve... And I have something to tell you."

"Is it serious?"

"No, not if swift action is taken. I'm prescribing a vacation for you. You need a good rest after all you've been through."

"I don't need a vacation..."

"Doctor's orders I'm afraid. I've already advised General Zero and he has counter-signed those orders."

"And what about all you've been through?"

"Well, I was coming to that Steve. You should be under medical supervision, so as President Copeland has ordered the cancellation of the underwater

breathing experiments to keep the peace with Titan, I'm free to come along with you. I'll see to it that you get the most out of your vacation."

"But I thought you said I needed a rest..."

"How's that Steve?"

"I er, I meant are we going to be doing all those winter sports like last time we went on vacation?"

"Oh no Steve. We'll be going somewhere warm and sunny, and we can have a good long talk..."

"A talk about what?"

"Us of course!"



## **Epilogue 1**

Stingray moved swiftly through the depths of the Pacific Ocean.

Troy smiled up at Marina as she stood beside him. It was good to be back on Earth at last and know the world was safe from alien attack for the foreseeable future.

“Well Marina, we’ll soon be at Pacifica. I bet your father is going to be really pleased to see you again.”

Marina returned the smile and nodded. She didn’t need a computer screen to convey her obvious excitement.

“Pacifica dead ahead Skipper.” Phones announced from the co-pilot’s position, feeling equally glad to be back aboard Stingray at last. “Shall I signal?”

“No Phones, let’s let Marina do that.”

Marina eagerly reached down to the console and began flashing Stingray’s external lights.

Down below them on the ocean floor they watched as a sequence of light flashes answered.

Marina grinned and operated the light switches once again.

Phones glanced over at Marina and then to Troy. “Say, what goes on Skipper? I thought it was just one signal.”

“Seems like some kind of private joke.” Troy said watching the lights in the distance.

Suddenly there was a whole blaze of lights ahead of them, all flashing different colours. Reds, blues, greens and yellows.



“The whole city is lit up like it’s the 4th of July!” Phones exclaimed.

“I guess that means we are clear to proceed...” laughed Troy. “That sure is a great welcome.”

Troy steered Stingray down towards the city of Pacifica. It looked for all the world like a collection of giant shells. But each shell had hundreds of windows, and each window flashed a coloured light.

A large door began to open in the largest shell-like structure and Stingray soon entered.

It wasn’t long before Troy, Phones and Marina were being welcomed by Marina’s father, Aphony.

Aphony did not speak but extended his arms in welcome, a broad smile on his face.

Troy took Marina by the hand and led her to greet him.

For a full minute Aphony and Marina just held each other and stared into each other’s eyes as if in a trance.

“I wish I knew what they were thinking...” Troy whispered to Phones.

“Yeah... If she’s talking to him, how much is she saying?”

“Seems more than just ‘hello’. Maybe she’s telling him the whole story... I guess thoughts are a lot faster than words.”

As if hearing their words, Aphony suddenly looked at Troy and gestured to chairs beside a large table. Then he locked eyes with his daughter once more.

“Guess this could take some time Phones...” Troy shrugged as he and Phones sat themselves down at the table.

But it was only moments later that Aphony stepped over to join the two Aquanauts. He placed a hand on each of their shoulders.

---

“On behalf of the World Aquanaut Security Patrol and the World Government...” Troy began to say.

Aphony placed a finger in front of his lips, instructing him to be silent.

“I get it...” Phones said, “I think you mean we should forget the formalities...”

Aphony and Marina both nodded. Aphony clapped his hands loudly and drinks were brought to the table.

“I just want you to know that... well, we’re glad to be your friends again.” Troy said. He never did like official speeches.

“That goes for me too your Highness... er I mean Aphony,” agreed Phones.

“Well things will be back to normal soon” said Troy. “I guess you’ll be eager to get back to Stingray once your vacation’s over Marina.”

Marina shook her head and glanced over at Phones.

“Phones? What did she mean by that ‘no’?”

Phones loosened his collar with a finger, “Well, she, er she means she’s not coming back to Stingray Troy. She’s representing Pacifica as an undersea delegate to the World Government.”

Troy turned pale.

## **Epilogue 2**

Surface Agent X2-Zero waited nervously outside Titan's throne room. He knew that Titan was in communication with Teufel, the fish god.

Finally, an Aquaphibian palace guard opened the doors and ushered him inside.

"X2-Zero." Titan declared. "Enter and attend my words."

"Yes oh wise and mighty Titan." X2-Zero responded coming to stand before his lord and master.

"X2-Zero, I have a change of plan." Titan sat upon his coral throne and gazed down at his servant. "I have decided to make peace with the Terraineans."

X2-Zero said nothing, but waited patiently for explanation.

"Teufel tells me that the Terraineans are of use to us — as allies."

"Allies?" X2-Zero repeated, trying to understand.

"Allies." Titan said again. "You, X2-Zero will be my Ambassador to the accursed... to our allies, the surface dwellers."

X2-Zero wanted to ask if Titan was serious, but he framed his reply carefully.

"As you command, oh Mighty One."

"There is to be no cause for recriminations on Titan. You will act with honour and integrity."

"But of course oh wise Titan."

“Nonetheless, X2-Zero, you will keep your eyes and ears open for Terrainean treachery — I do not trust them. However, we live in interesting times.”

**The End**

