

Across The Universe

A Pirate Story

Chapter 1

2245 had been a good year up to now but standing here, pronounced guilty, in the dock and sentenced to “Across The Universe 23” had sort of ruined it, actually more like completely bugged it really. It wasn’t how Conrad Watts had planned it, but, try as he might, he wasn’t Conrad Watts was he. At the moment he was Jonathon Spark, apparently a very unsavoury character who deserved the most severe punishment imaginable for his collected crimes none of which Conrad had the faintest idea about.

Conrad Watts was a pirate, a software pirate to be precise, very small time, with a vastly inflated opinion of his crimes and ability. He hung out with other fringe dwellers and occasionally rubbed shoulders with the big players, one of whom, in a private earnest conversation, had sold him on the idea of keeping multiple clean identities just in case of trouble. Conrad was thrilled with the idea and immediately set about doing so. He had a couple of shady connections with even shadier characters and in no time he had a handful of stolen identities to select from if need be.

Now standing in the dock, he couldn’t believe how stupid he had been. Obviously he had been set up, more than likely by none other than Jonathon Spark himself who is probably in the gallery at this moment watching himself getting sentenced to “Across The Universe 23”. Conrad furtively looked around. Nobody in the gallery seemed to be laughing hysterically, even on the inside. I guess that was to be expected. Getting sentenced to “Across The Universe 23” was no laughing matter. It was a death sentence.

The whole “Across The Universe” program started many, many years ago. Some cunning media executive recognized the untapped potential to be gleaned from the trials and tribulations of death row prisoners. He convinced a conglomerate of companies to invest their spare cash and build a reasonable inexpensive prison space shuttle, the original “Across The Universe” fill it up with death row prisoners, suitable supplies and, of course, all encompassing cameras then fire the ship towards the sun and watch the drama unfold. It would take a long time, sometimes years, to get there, long enough for the paying viewer to get attached to the show. It created a reality show where drama, violence and the death of unimportant people was assured, imagine the numbers. It was a hit just waiting to happen and happen it did. ATU1 smashed all ratings on the way to becoming the biggest reality show of all time. Needless there had

to be follow-ups and here we are, ATU23, and seemingly the whole planet was addicted.

The basic format of the show was the same, lots of prisoners, food, water and air although sometimes the amounts of these were deliberately varied, which mostly lead to disastrous and sometimes very ugly results. There were no guards and the prisoners were allowed the basic run of the ship. However the important systems and controls were thoroughly sealed away. Occasionally a group of smarter prisoners would try to crack these systems, either physically or electronically but this led to the air being turned off which in turn led to them not being in a condition to try again as their, and everyone else's, corpses drifted slowly into the sun's bosom. Only one ship, ATU14, had some-one managed to get into the control room alive. He was the smartest member of a particularly gifted group of prisoners who had, up to that point, managed to stay alive. He managed to fiddle with the controls in an effort to change the ships course and some people swear they saw the ships trajectory flicker just before the sun's heat distorted the picture. Others were less cheerful, a burnings a burning.

The ships themselves were manufactured in space using a fiercely fought tendering process and were mostly constructed by large Martian conglomerates, after all, they had all the technology and money. Mars had been colonised in 2078 and for many years earth had been sending Mars her best and brightest in an effort to make the red planet viable. When, in 2156, the Martians shot down an earth freighter the people on earth realised their mistake. Since that time Mars has gradually gained ascendancy and now is totally in control. An uneasy truce hangs between the two planets. The clever, the rich, the gifted all live on Mars and everyone on Earth wants to get there. However, there is no traffic allowed between the two planets and many a dodgy earth built spaceship hangs between the two planets as a warning to trespasses. But people, only the gifted, do still vanish. How, no-one is completely sure but some suggest matter transportation. It's pure speculation, there is no proof, but people still vanish.

The time waiting in prison for enough numbers to fill ATU23 passed in a blur for Conrad. He still hadn't come to grips with his fate when he found himself boarding one of a fleet of shuttles to rendezvous with the ATU23 orbiting the earth. As he approached the prison ship he took in its huge bulk. This season, for some reason best known to the manufactures, the prison ship was fashioned in the style of an old 19th century pirate ship complete with masts and sails, maybe it was symbolic of the company who built it, no matter.

As Conrad, with all his fellow inmates, boarded the ATU23 and the rest of the shuttles disgorged their sorry loads he took a last look at freedom. As he watched the

last inmates arrive and the outside hatch lock close with a bang of finality he, and all the others, silently took in their fate. As a seething mass they felt the ship shudder and slowly but surely they accelerated their way to their fiery future.

Things were certainly grim for Conrad, never grimmer in fact, but he did have one small advantage that he kept close to his chest, ready, for when the time was ripe.

(Laurie Healy)

Chapter 2

Conrad settled himself into his allocated seat – well, really, it was just a numbered section of a plastic slatted bench. There were four of them squeezed on that bench, backsides tight against each other, and little leg room, meaning he wouldn't be able to pick up anything he'd inadvertently dropped on the floor.

'Just sit down and enjoy the ride', he thought. But this wouldn't be easy on those seats; and not with that ancient crone sitting next to him. He might have managed some sleep, but she kept digging him in the ribs and asking about how far was it to the toilet. 'Toilet', thought Conrad, 'probably only one for the whole ship. Best just hang onto it.' Then aloud, 'They're right up the front, but be prepared to wait'.

No changes of clothing permitted and nothing else really, only what you could carry in one hand, and then you had look after it when you were seated – no overhead lockers. Conrad had brought his long-life 3D entertainment package, but even that was a squeeze. He was glad he'd been allocated an end seat against the outside wall where there was some space to hide it against the wall.

Conrad resigned himself to long periods of nothingness. There were no washing facilities, and not enough toilets, so the ride would get rather smelly rather quickly. And, there were no rosters for cleaning those ablution areas, or for kitchen duty, as each person was responsible for getting their own food allocation from the automatic dispensers – iris recognition actuated, so doubling up was eliminated. On entering, they'd each been given an empty three partition plastic food container, with snap cover, to allow them to collect their food from the dispenser. You could only get one allocation per day, and this led to major altercations when the aggressive passengers tried to muscle in on those queue-ing up.

Conrad wondered why the struggle for food. The diet was porridge, sauerkraut and lima beans only; as the shipping contractors had considered that these were sufficient to sustain human life, well, for a while anyway; they didn't care about long term. If you were quick, you could get the dispenser to spit them into the separate spaces on the container. If not, the sauerkraut gave moisture to the dry and unpalatable porridge, but as that was all the food there was, the containers were usually licked clean. This was just as well, as there was no water spare for washing them.

Getting enough water for drinking was a problem in itself, given that all water had to be recycled from the atmosphere; there were no washing facilities for body or clothes, and only one drinking fountain. Cups weren't provided. Some water could be

captured in the food containers, if you were careful, but only when there was no rush at the water bubbler.

But, what Conrad particularly disliked was the lack of a sense of movement. The ship had accelerated extremely slowly - not like the shuttle bringing them to the ship when it had left earth; those 3g forces really let you know that you were going somewhere. But now nothing, just boredom. It could take weeks before anything happened.

But he was wrong. The live entertainment erupted just as he got back to his seat with his daily allocation of food. An empty container was thrown from the other side of the hold, followed by a lunge by the woman who owned it. She was screaming that her full container had been snatched, and the food quickly demolished by the woman behind her. The two combatants were ill matched, which added to the entertainment. The one who'd had her meal taken, was small and weedy, while the other was tall and muscular, and they were going at it hammer and tongs.

The rest of the queue joined in the pushing and shoving, ensuring that those who were seated nearby were aggressively pushing away those bodies that were suddenly sitting on them or lying across their laps. Before long the whole area was in uproar. Conrad assumed, from watching previous ATU's at home, that the action would keep up until someone was killed, and then it would die down - until the next ruckus.

Conrad huddled down in his seat and waited for this fracas to wear itself out. The timing of the action he was anticipating was getting close. He'd managed to pull out the ThreeDee, and found that it had been six days and three and a half hours since the doors were locked. Six days of terrible food; repeats of repeats on the ThreeDee, and now nothing to watch but violence from his incarcerated fellow travellers. Some had tried to break into the locked control room in an attempt to do something, anything, perhaps turn the craft around, but they only found that they came away with bruises or broken bones as the electronically-activated self-defence power-arms came into play.

Conrad dropped in to autohypnosis. He found this was becoming easier as time went on, and he was getting good at waking just before the red indicator light above his head told him it was time for his next food allocation. And this time, particularly this time, he wanted to be fully conscious, as it was getting near time for external action.

A loud thud from the direction of the docking portal was his confirmation.

(Don Gemmell)

Chapter 3

Conrad listened carefully. A number of synchronized clicks signalled the end of the docking process. As he mentally prepared himself for action he became aware of a steady hissing noise from the oxygen exchange vents above. A fine mist rained down and almost as one his fellow travellers folded to the floor, rapidly unconscious. His last thought – “God help us if this is Saran!”

The airlock opened and humanoids quickly loaded their cargo onto a long travelator leading outwards through a tunnel which led into a room of massive proportions. The stark whiteness, bright lights and instrumentation gave it the appearance of a giant operating room.

Robots inserted behaviour modifying computer chips in the ankle of each prisoner. Once conscious should an escape attempt be made, then the chip would default to a low level shock administered, increasing in intensity until the desired behaviour was reached. In this way minimal supervision was required.

Maintaining prisoner health meant that nutrition and hydration were strictly controlled and involved insertion of a portal into the abdomen where daily tube feeding occurred. Food fights would be a thing of the past.

Conrad gradually became aware of lights and sound. He kept his eyes closed and concentrated. He felt pain and a buzzing sensation in his lower leg. There was tenderness around his left flank. “So we’re alive for a purpose obviously. No point wasting resources on the damned. I need a recce.” Conrad was one of the few “transporters” left. He had inherited the gift courtesy of a stem cell transplant into his frontal lobe – his father a gifted surgeon in a former life foresaw the decimation of intelligent human life as Martians took over resources and laid waste to land they had no use for.

By focussing on the so called “middle eye” Conrad was able to float the essence from his body and slowly circled the room from above, his body below, inert. What he saw staggered him.

(Mary Wyatt)

Chapter 4

This could not be any more perfect he thought. His escape would be easier than he had originally anticipated. No longer would he be beholding to Juan Carlos, ATU14's brilliant escapologist and owner of Mars' biggest Interplanetary Ship Builders. The code provided by JC to enable Conrad to use the only cleverly disguised escape pod on ATU23, was totally unnecessary now that he was free of the confines of the ship... the chip in his leg did hinder him somewhat and the tube in his side pissed him off a bit, but all things considered, this was a good place to be in.

This was certainly better anyway, than being on a one-way trip to 'big burn city'.

With further scrutiny of the systems below he was able to identify the 'on-off' switch, so to speak, for the implants. All he needed to do was convince the tall blue guy with the tool-belt to flip the switch. A simple task, thanks to phase two of good old Dad's original stem cell implant, which had given him the subtle power of persuasion. Actually, there was nothing subtle about it and this gift had certainly led to a rather large number of delightfully entertaining evenings spent with some of Earth's and Mars' more flexible women – but that is another story.

So the tall blue guy flipped the switch and moved on to the next ATU23 passenger.

Shortly thereafter it was a simple matter of re-entering his body and removing the feeding tube – applying a descent slab of antiseptic and healing gel from his first aide kit and he was on his way to the escape module...

Now where would a bunch of aliens put an escape module?

After a few close brushes with patrolling guards he located what he figured was not an escape pod but a very snazzy personal transporter vehicle. This would certainly be worth a few dollars when he eventually made it back to Earth. The control panel was covered in a very alien script, obviously. Clever button mashing for a few minutes and a good deal of luck finally brought something to the screen he could work with – a computer language called Codex, at least that's what it's called back in his hometown. It seems that the language of mathematics is universal... thankfully, Conrad thought to himself.

Ok, strapped in, computers on line, course plotted for home, time to burn in a good way and, Conrad thought, time to meet up with my old friend - Jonathon Spark.

Chapter 5

"It's him isn't it?" Jonathon Spark offered, his eyes straying to the park outside the window. It was a beautiful day here on Earth and the girls were out parading, nice. Still, the exasperation in his voice was barely masked behind his stylish alligator shoes that were carelessly parked on the desk.

"Looks like it," came a disembodied voice from the next room. The room was chock full of dials, instruments and eager looking men that were busy tracking a certain object that was on route from Mars to Earth.

"Shit."

Spark ruminated a while and drummed his fingers on the part of the desk he could reach.

"Well. He certainly can't come back here."

"Three cheers for Captain Obvious," the sarcasm in the disembodied voice was ringing.

Somewhere in the room, dueling with all the dials, a phone rang.

"Yes sir."

"That's what it looks like and he's heading this way."

"At the speed he's going, three weeks, a month at the outside."

"No sir. He won't touch down. I can guarantee it."

"Yes sir. He's here. I'll let him know."

The phone conversation stopped and Spark heard heavy military footsteps heading his way.

A blunt sergeant's face appeared at the door and motioned to him.

"The general wants to meet you and Juan Carlos at the beach house tonight to discuss the latest developments."

Spark nodded ascent, no future in riling the general.

"Eight o'clock sharp. Be there," This was a voice used to command, and Spark immediately got on his comm. and messaged Juan.

"Beach house. Eight sharp."

"OK," blipped across the screen.

In the intervening hours Spark spent his time just getting his shit together. A pending meeting with the general can do that.

The beach house was sprawled on a hill overlooking a deserted cove far from the city but it still had all the frills. Low slung, hugely spread out and purposely casual. The atmosphere at eight pm was cool bordering on idyllic.

“Take a seat, gents,” waved a meaty hand from behind the bar. “Drink?”

“Scotch for me,” Juan replied boarding a stool.

“Beer’s fine,” Spark offered following suit.

The general assembled the drinks and, from behind the bar, spun around to face the others.

A small silence descended between the men as they sipped their drinks. The general’s reptile eyes betrayed nothing. He was summing things up, working the angles.

He was the leader of a very tight, very secretive section of government tasked with finding a way to end Mars dominance over Earth. Nothing was off limits; whatever they came up with just can’t be traced back to earth. His latest scheme, with the help of these two gents, was hair-brained to say the least and it was starting to unravel. There were some nasty loose ends to take care of and one of them was standing on the other side of the bar just in front of the muzzle of the proton gun he was holding under the counter.

“So, looks like Watts is heading back to earth,” the general offered. “Resourceful little bastard. Needless to say he won’t make it, not with what he’s carrying. And that leads us to you.” He looked over to Spark. “The Martian’s think that’s you in that escape module whizzing your way back to earth, and when you and your escape module inexplicitly blow up before you get here, you will understandably be rather dead. So ...” The electric bark of a proton gun pieced the air and Spark crumpled to the ground, dead before he moved. “We just can’t have you bobbing up all over the place.”

He flicked a calculating glance over to Juan Carlos and started to move from behind the bar. “As for you. Nice work with the AT23. ” He paused and slung an intimidating arm around the now terrified Juan’s shoulders. “We could use a man of your means in the future.”

He led Juan past Spark’s smoking body and out the door to a waiting car. “We’ll stay in touch. How are Lois and the kids?”

“Good,” Juan stammered.

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” the general replied easily.

Wordlessly Juan found himself chauffeured back to the city and dropped at his apartment to be greeted by his wife, Lois, and the children. He looked at them with new eyes and gave each of them an extra special hug.

Back at the beach house the general was about to report in. A small discrete screen flickered into life and his superior’s face appeared.

“What’s the situation, General,” he asked bluntly.

“Grim, I’m afraid, Mr. President.” the general replied apologetically. “Looks like the whole thing’s a bust.”

There was a small pause at the other end.

“How?”

“Watts. The little bastard escaped and is now heading back here.” Before he could be interrupted he quickly added. “Don’t worry he won’t land. We’ll blow that shit out of the sky the moment it’s in range. Watts and that plaque he’s carrying won’t get back to earth.” “

“You’d better. As you know that strain of influenza is the most virulent form ever devised, 99.9999% effective in fact. Too bad Watts was the only immune carrier we’ve found who fitted our profile. It was like his DNA was almost designed to carry it.” Wistfully the president said, “Add to that the fact that the Martians wanted Spark nearly as much as we did and Watts hadn’t even heard of him, he must have been living under a rock. God, it was almost too good to be true.”

“There are others,” offered the general hopefully. “There’s that young girl and also that blind man, both carriers.”

“That boat’s sailed. Neither of those can be reasonably explained. The Martians don’t want them and would never buy their cover stories,” the president explained. “The whole plan relied on the Martians wanting to get in contact with Watts, or Spark after we transformed him, and take him back to Mars. He was the perfect bait.”

“Well. At least that part of the plan worked,” the general replied brightly. “Actually it worked better than we expected,” he added. “We didn’t even need Carlos’s built-in escape module; the Martians actually came to the ship.”

“Agreed,” replied the president. “But we underestimated Watts’s skills. Who would have thought a little underwhelming parasite like him would escape and blow the whole plan to bits.”

“Could there have been enough contact time?” inquired the general. “You know to pass it on.”

“Probably not and until proven wrong we’re running with that,” answered the president. “He was ‘rescued’ two weeks after take-off and was only in their hands for what, three to four days at the most. The virus was timed to activate after three weeks so it wouldn’t look suspicious on the AT23. You know, give them time to circle the bait.” As an aside the president added. “Mind you, virus activation is not an exact science, lots of variables according to the boffins.”

“OK Mr. President. I guess that wraps it up,” the general signed off looking at Spark’s body. “All the loose ends have been tied up here. We’ve just got to eliminate Watts when he’s in range.”

“Ok,” replied the president. “Keep up the good work.”

Outside, in the depths of space, the silence from Mars was deafening.

(Laurie Healy)