

DEATHSHIP

A Fireball XL5 and Stingray Story

(written for a comic strip)



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PART ONE

Alarms were sounding all over Space City.

“XL5 to launch stations. XL5 to launch stations” blared Lieutenant Ninety’s voice over the Launch Area tannoy system.

“Get Colonel Zodiac back here on the double” ordered Commander Zero from his control desk high up in the revolving tower that dominated the skyline of the Pacific island base.

“Yes Sir” said Ninety.

Seconds later the phone rang at Doctor Venus’s beach house a few miles away on Atello Beach.

“We’ll be right their Lieutenant” said Colonel Steve Zodiac turning to XL5’s pretty French doctor of space medicine. “Here we go again Venus.”

Ten minutes later Steve had parked his bright yellow hover car in the Space City parking lot and they were jumping onto their waiting jetmobiles.

“Okay Venus?”

“Okay Steve”

“Right, let’s go” said Steve as they lifted off in unison and sped towards the launch rail and their waiting space ship - the most famous craft of the World Space Patrol.

They flew high along the full length of Fireball XL5 and then lowered their jetmobiles down into the open hatch just to the rear of the forward control cabin.

“Full power, Robert” instructed Steve as he settled himself into the pilot’s seat next to his mechanical co-pilot.

“Full power. Full power.” repeated the transparent robot in its monotone electronic voice.

The launch trolley rockets fired and Fireball began to move along the launch rail - slowly at first but constantly gaining speed. Booster rockets fired as the 300 foot patrol ship approached the 45 degree ramp at the end of the mile long rail and then Fireball’s own motors roared into life as she began to climb.

Seconds later XL5 was heading for space having left its launch trolley far behind.

“Steve, steer course 173 zero blue and maintain full power” came Professor Matthew Matic’s voice over the ship’s intercom.

“What’s going on, Mat?” asked Steve as he set the course code his navigator had given him. “Zero said you would brief me when we were underway.”

“It’s serious, Steve” said Mat sitting at his circular work bench in the navigation bay “A gigantic alien space ship is approaching Earth and it ignores all attempts at radio contact.”

“Okay, Mat” responded Steve “I get the picture. We’ve got to make contact and see what the aliens intentions are - and stop them if necessary.”

The alien space ship was like nothing the crew of XL5 had ever seen before. It was over one mile long and had a distinctly organic look about it. There were no view ports and no obvious propulsion system - at least there was no sign of any weapons either.

“Still no response to my hails, Mat” said Steve into the intercom. “I’m going to take a closer look.”

He manoeuvred the patrol ship alongside the cosmic behemoth.

Suddenly an alien mind reached out and made contact with Steve and his crew:

“LEAVE US TO DIE!!”

Then a blinding burst of energy lanced out from the giant ship and enveloped Fireball leaving them no time to recover from the mental onslaught.

Steve lost all control of his ship in that instant. Robert the Robot went wild waving his arms about while letting off coolant vapour from his head - and one swing hit the astronaut across the temple.

The next thing he was aware of was Robert slumped over the co-pilots controls obviously in need of a recharge.

He could only have been unconscious for a few minutes and yet Fireball was now half a million miles from her previous position - on a collision course with the Moon!!!

Lunar craters filled the viewing canopy getting nearer by the second...

"Venus, Mat. Hold on." yelled Steve into the intercom as he attempted to regain control of his ship.

XL5 dived low over the Sea of Tranquillity before pulling away from imminent destruction - they escaped death by inches.

"Steve, what happened?" asked Mat, sounding rather shaken over the intercom.

"That alien ship tried to destroy us."

"...and almost succeeded." added Venus as she entered the main control cabin behind Steve.

"It's still heading directly for Earth and shows no sign of decelerating." said Mat over the intercom "We've got to stop it, Steve - if a ship that size crashes down on the mainland it could destroy half a continent...."

"The pilot must be a telepath if that 'warning' is anything to go by" mused Venus.

“He’s got a death wish if you ask me” said Steve “ and I don’t intend to disappoint him...”

Fireball was soon back within interceptor missile range of the alien space craft which was getting closer to Earth all the time.

With Robert out of action Venus now sat beside Steve in the co-pilot’s chair.

“Priming interceptors” said Steve as he operated the controls “Firing interceptors one and two.”

The missiles flashed away from XL5’s nose cone and detonated dead on target - but to no effect.

“Firing interceptors three ,four, five and six.” said Steve

Still no effect.

Suddenly another energy bolt struck Fireball and again hurled her over half a million miles across the space sky before Steve could regain control of his ship - at least there were no natural satellites in the way this time.

Steve turned to the neutroni radio transmitter - his face ashen. “This is Fireball XL5 calling Space City. Come in Commander Zero”

“I can hear you, Zodiac”

“It’s hostile, Commander - and we can’t stop it.”

“Okay Steve, get away from it - I’m launching planatomic missiles now.” said Zero.

Earth’s last line of defence was launched from the underground silos that ringed Space City Island.

The most destructive weapons ever produced by mankind piled into the alien space craft just as it passed the Moon. The gigantic ship was enveloped in a ball of superheated plasma hotter than the Sun itself - but when the missiles were spent the alien craft remained unscathed.

It was indestructible!!!

Mat quickly checked his instruments again and breathed a sigh of relief - at least the mainland was safe. On its present course and speed it would crash down into the Pacific Ocean within half an hour - unless it burnt up on entry into Earth's atmosphere and that was extremely unlikely after what it had just survived.

"Get me Commander Shore," bellowed Zero "This is a job for the WASPs."



PART TWO

Commander Shore had sounded Battle Stations as soon as he received news of the approaching alien space ship and Marineville had been lowered to the safety of its underground emplacement - blast doors closed tightly above it.

The rhythmic beat of Launch Stations could now be heard all over the Californian headquarters of the World Aquanaut Security Patrol.

Lieutenant Atlanta Shore watched Stingray's steady progress along the ten mile launch tunnel from her monitor screen.

"Opening Ocean Door - Stingray seaborne, Commander." she said, turning to her father.

"Good." said Shore grimly. "Anything can happen in the next half hour."

Stingray headed for the crash down site at rate six - six hundred knots per hour.

"If Zodiac couldn't stop it what can we do, Skipper?" questioned Lieutenant Phones Sheridan, co-pilot and hydrophones operator of the WASPs most advanced combat sub.

"Whatever it takes" snapped Captain Troy Tempest - well aware that the destiny of mankind could now be resting on his shoulders.

Stingray surfaced just in time to see the truly awesome spectacle of the mile long alien space ship plunge into the sea not one hundred yards away.

"Dive! Dive! Dive!" called Troy.

"Pressure compensators on" responded Phones as Troy put the supersub into a near vertical descent to follow the alien behemoth down to the ocean bed - over 30,000 feet below.

With an impact that registered at least 9 on the Richter Scale in every weather station around the world the alien ship speared the ocean floor leaving less than half of its length exposed.

It looked more like a giant sea anemone than a space craft once the murky waters had cleared enough to see it through Stingray's computer enhanced viewing ports.

"I can't see any hatches, Phones - are you picking up anything on the hydrophones?" asked Troy.

"No, Skipper."

"Can you see anything, Marina?" asked Troy, turning to the third member of his crew - the silent girl from the sea who had just walked forward from the relaxation bay to join them.

She stared in amazement at the alien vessel that had invaded her domain and shook her head. Marina's eyes were much more sensitive than her human crewmates and many times in the past she had detected dangers unnoticed by Stingray's instruments - but not this time ...

"LEAVE US TO DIE!!"

Contact with the alien mind left the Stingray crew reeling.

Troy and Phones soon recovered but Marina clutched her head. Her lovely features became contorted with a look of severe agony. Then the unthinkable happened...

Marina screamed - and kept screaming!!!

"Phones take her up" bellowed Troy "We've got to get away from here. Whatever is in that thing is killing Marina."

The further away Stingray got the calmer Marina became until she closed her eyes and lost consciousness - there was nothing Troy could do to wake her.

“Get Marina back here, Tempest” ordered Commander Shore over the radio, after Troy had reported events to Marineville. “Maybe the Doctor can give us some clues about these aliens once he’s examined her. There is nothing you can do out there except get yourselves killed.”

Some time later Marina lay on a bed in the Marineville Hospital wired up to state of the art monitoring equipment. Doctor Graham stood beside her at a loss to diagnose why she had fallen into such a deep coma - her vital signs were fading and there was nothing he could do to revive them. Marina was dying...

“How is she, Doc?” asked Troy as he entered the ward.

“If I didn’t know better I would say she has rystamesia, but there is no trace of the alien virus in her system - and she’s never been away from Earth in her life.” responded Graham with a puzzled look on his face.

Rystamesia! A deadly alien disease that had wiped out hundreds of civilisations across the galaxy.

PART THREE

Fireball XL5 had touched down at Space City as soon as the alien ship crashed in the Pacific - and now Steve Zodiac and his crew waited tensely in the Tower standby lounge for news from Marineville.

The World Government had put a complete clamp down on all media coverage of the giant alien space craft - not even TV Century 21 could get near this story.

Suddenly the waiting was over.

“Steve, I want you and Venus to get over to Marineville.” said Commander Zero as he walked into the standby lounge. “The Doctor there wants Venus to examine one of the Stingray crew - he thinks the sea girl Marina has somehow contracted rystamesia.”

“Oh no!” said Venus “We could soon have an epidemic on our hands if this is linked to the aliens.”

One hour later Venus was conferring with Doctor Graham beside Marina’s hospital bed.

“Marina does not have rystamesia.” said the doctor of space medicine “I believe the aliens have rystamesia and telepathic contact with them has somehow triggered the symptoms in Marina because her mind is more receptive than ours - she only thinks she has the disease.”

“Her symptoms may be psychosomatic but they are still killing her.” added Graham.

“If the alien crew are all falling into a rystamesic coma that would explain the high energy readings Mat is picking up back at Space City.” said Steve as he entered the ward with Commander Shore “The ship’s reactor must be running out of control - she’ll explode soon and create a shock wave that will devastate the whole West Coast of America.”

“It won’t just be the West Coast.” added Venus “The explosion will spread the virus all around the world and wipe out most of mankind before we can manufacture enough vaccine to stop it.”

“You’re the expert Venus.” said Steve coolly “There must be something you can do?”

“Doctor, get me the rystamesia vaccine” said Venus, turning to Graham.

“What’s the point?” questioned Doctor Graham. “If she hasn’t got the -”

“Just do it” ordered Shore grasping at straws.

“I’m using reverse logic” explained Venus as she injected Marina with the vaccine “Marina doesn’t have the disease - but if the aliens telepathically sense we have a cure they may take notice.”

“BRING US THE VACCINE!!”

Everyone in the Marineville Hospital ‘heard’ the alien mind speak to them.

Later that day Steve, Venus and Commander Shore watched Stingray’s progress on the location detector in the Marineville Control Tower as she approached the alien space ship again.

“We have loaded the vaccine into our missiles.” called Troy over the supersub’s radio transmitter.

“Firing all missiles now.”

Wave after wave of harmless sting missiles left Stingray’s forward tubes to impact on the alien space craft’s organic hull. They were instantly absorbed without leaving a mark. Stingray turned and headed back to Marineville - all her missiles spent.

Two hours later and the alien ship’s reactor was nearing critical mass when suddenly Marina’s vital signs began to improve. The alien power emissions subsided almost simultaneously - the explosion that would have brought about the end of the human race had been narrowly avoided.

The next day the alien space ship slowly extracted itself from the seabed and rose to the surface. It hung motionless above the water for 30 seconds before launching itself into space on a tail of incandescent energy never to be seen again.

Marina was by now well enough to sit up in bed and smile at Troy, Phones, Steve and Venus as they brought her up to date on events.

She would like to see Titan's face if he ever discovered that his former slave girl had played such a vital role in saving his hated Terraineans from near extinction.

The End

