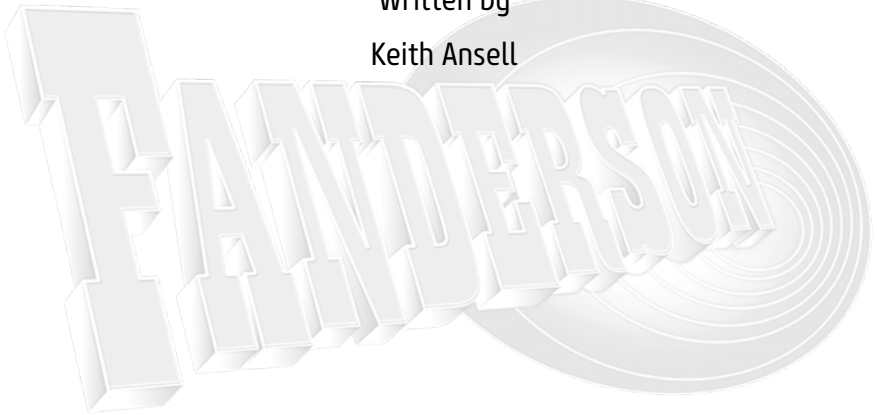


PARADOX

A Fireball XL5 and Supercar Story

Written by

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CHAPTER ONE

'Steve, I picked up something odd on the astrascope as we entered the Solar System,' called Professor Matthew Matic, the navigator and engineer of World Space Patrol ship Fireball XL5 from his station in the navigation bay. 'It's drifting near our present heading. It looks like a spaceship, Steve - or what's left of one.'

Colonel Steve Zodiac, XL5's commander and pilot, sat in the forward control cabin next to his transparent mechanical co-pilot, Robert the Robot. 'Okay Mat,' replied Steve into the intercom. 'Give me a course and we'll pull up alongside her and have a look. I'll let Zero know we're going to be late home. That'll upset his patrol rota - let's hope it's worth it for our sakes.'

Within half an hour Fireball XL5 had fired retros and was lying in free-float alongside the wrecked spaceship. Mat's instruments could detect no power emissions or life signs. The ship looked as if she had been caught in an extremely violent meteorite storm. The hull was badly holed and scorched all over. From what could still be read of her markings she was definitely from Earth. In fact the wreck was surprisingly similar in size and design to XL5 herself - like an early prototype of the famous space patrol ship. The main motor assembly had apparently vaporised and one stabiliser wing had lost its pod. Steve could only wonder at the severity of the storm she must have passed through.

'How long do you think she's been out here Mat?' asked Venus, the lovely French Doctor of Space Medicine, and remaining member of the XL5 crew, as she looked over the Professor's shoulder at the increasingly detailed pictures being captured by the astrascope.

'Well, I've checked the computer records and there have been no missing space - er, spaceships reported that even remotely fit this one's

description,' said Mat with a slightly puzzled frown growing on his usually cheerful face.

'We cracked the mystery of the TA2 last year folks,' said Steve entering the navigation bay. 'I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this one once we've boarded her. Okay, let's get to the ejection bay. We'll all go over and check her out. I've left Robert with instructions to monitor the wreck and let us know if she begins to break up. The sooner we're on our way home again the better - I'm dying for a steak.'

Ten minutes later they ejected into space and with the aid of their thruster packs slowly 'space-walked' over to the wreck.

They did not wear spacesuits but were protected from the rigors of vacuum by invisible energy fields naturally generated around their bodies as a result of the oxygen pills they had each taken.

There was no need to search for a hatchway - there were holes large enough for all three to 'walk' through side-by-side whichever way they turned.

'Let's have a closer look at some of these markings on the wings before we enter,' said Steve, his energy field's resonance allowing him to talk to the others at close quarters without the need for a radio. They all landed on the port side about halfway along the sloping delta-shaped wing, where three wide stripes could still be seen running in parallel, diagonal to the hull.

The ship's name had obviously been painted across these stripes in bold black letters but now only UP R was still readable.

Venus rubbed some of the meteorite dust away with her hands - she could feel the coldness of the metal through her protective field enough to discourage prolonged contact.

'That could be an 'S' at the beginning of the name Steve,' said Venus.

'Any ideas Mat?' asked Steve.

'Yeah, Steve, but I'll keep quiet until I'm sure otherwise you might think I'm an old toot.'

They entered the wreck and brought powerful torches into play that had been clipped on their belts. 'Keep your thrusterpacks on, folks,' said Steve. 'There's obviously no artificial gravity in here.'

'Do you think I'm crazy or something?' said Mat with a twinkle in his eye - the others remembered when he'd removed his pack aboard the wreckage of the TA2 and had almost been lost in space as a result.

A feeling of foreboding began to settle upon the XL5 crew as they made their way deeper into the spaceship. They soon had to take another oxygen pill each to maintain their body temperatures in the near absolute freezing conditions.

Over half the ship incorporated the most powerful rocket motors Mat had ever seen. 'In normal space I bet this baby would have given Fireball a run for her money,' he said. 'But no sign of a hyperdrive, just conventional rockets. The technology is old Steve. I'd guess at around a hundred years old.'

'What?!' gasped both Steve and Venus together.

'Come on,' suggested Mat. 'Let's find the control cabin. We should get some answers in there.'

The ship's corridor was a nightmare to traverse in zero gravity by torchlight - equipment that must have broken loose in the meteorite storm floated around them with enough mass to injure if they were not very careful.

They eventually entered the hatchway into the forward control cabin and slowly swung their torches around.

'Steve!' exclaimed Venus, the first to see the two space-suited figures sitting at the flight controls.

'Now steady, Venus,' said Mat, sounding more nervous than he would care to admit.

'I'm a doctor, don't forget,' said Venus, steeling herself to approach the unmoving astronauts.

She shone her torch into the face-plates and stifled a groan. 'Dead, Steve,' she said calmly. 'They've both been dead for a very long time.'

'Look at the names on their space-suits,' said Steve.

'This ship - it's the Super-R,' gasped Mat. 'I was right, it's the Super-R!'

'That's impossible Professor,' said Venus quietly, a shiver running down her spine. 'Super-R was destroyed on her second test flight in 1962... She crashed back to Earth completely out of control. My uncle's last book covered the Super-R disaster in detail - the exploits of the Supercar team are a favourite subject of his. This can't possibly be the Super-R... It can't...'

'Impossible it may be, but this is the Super-R,' said Mat. 'I knew it from the moment we tried to read the name on the wing.'

'Could another one have been built?' queried Steve.

'No, Steve,' said Venus, drawing on the knowledge of her famous historian uncle, Felix Crabtree. 'The US government cancelled the Super-R project. It had become a costly embarrassment after a number of foreign sabotage attempts had almost caused disaster prior to the crashdown. I remember reading that the reputations of the designers, Professor Popkiss and Doctor Beaker, were badly damaged by the events and they almost lost their government research contracts as a result.'

'I need further evidence that this is the original Super-R before deciding on what action to take,' said Steve.

'The astronauts' ID tags will shed more light on matters,' said Venus. 'Help me with the helmet seals, Mat.'

'Okay Venus,' said the Professor, his throat suddenly dry.

Steve watched his colleagues carry out the grisly task and remove one helmet and then the other.

The frozen, mummified corpses sat rigidly as Venus felt for the tags around the nearest one's neck. The eyes were sunken pits, the skin papery and thin, the hair long and wispy. The space doctor was glad she hadn't been subjected to the foul stale air that must have been released when the helmets came off. The fact that this was carried out by torchlight made the whole thing a nightmare for the Fireball crew that would not be soon forgotten.

'I've got them Steve,' said Venus, reading the ID tags. She turned to Steve and Mat, amazement on her face. 'These men didn't die in space according to the history books - they shouldn't be here! This can't be happening...' Her voice held a slightly hysterical note.

'Who are they Venus?' demanded Steve. 'Who are they?'

'Mike Mercury and Bill Gibson,' replied Venus, almost in a whisper.

'I must check the hold,' called Mat, disappearing through the hatchway. A few minutes later he was back. 'Steve, Venus - follow me. I've found something that confirms the astronauts' identities; it's something else that shouldn't be here. I saw it two years ago at the World Air Museum in Unity City...'

They followed the Professor into the wrecked spacecraft's equipment hold to see sitting there, dusty though undamaged, the marvel of an earlier age: Supercar!

CHAPTER TWO

An hour later the three World Space Patrol officers were back aboard Fireball XL5 sitting in the great ship's lounge drinking coffee and trying to make sense of the situation. The fact that they could get no response from Space City only made matters worse.

'Let me try and get things straight, Mat,' said Steve after listening to the Professor talk for over ten minutes. 'You believe we have somehow been drawn into an alternate universe where Super-R was lost in space... And the only way for us to escape and get home is by somehow re-establishing past events as we know them?'

'I know it's one hell of an assumption but all the evidence points that way Steve,' said Mat. 'I've down-loaded Super-R's flight log into our computers and now have a precise record of the events we must change to stop this time line ever coming into existence.'

'I've checked our history records and they still confirm the time and date Super-R should have crashed back to Earth,' added Venus. 'Mike Mercury and Bill Gibson escaped in Supercar as they re-entered Earth's atmosphere. The record states: 'Professor Popkiss and Doctor Beaker were never able to explain what happened during the test flight. Mercury and Gibson lost consciousness when the motors went out of control and then found themselves in Supercar flying away from Super-R as she crashed back to Earth'. Don't you see Steve? We must have saved them...'

'That's crazy,' said Steve. 'How do we travel back to that exact moment in 1962 and how do we know our presence there won't make things ten times worse?'

'There is no other way out of this nightmare,' insisted Mat. 'If we can find a way to return to 1962 who is to say we are changing anything - we could just become part of the events already recorded in our history books. If we

don't ensure that Super-R crashes back towards Earth and save her crew our time-line will never come into existence.'

'I know it sounds like a paradox Steve, but we've got to change the past to save our future,' added Venus intensely.

'Okay, okay, you've both made your point,' said Steve, 'but even if I go along with this crazy venture, how do we travel back to an exact moment in time?'

'Well, er, there are a number of ways that are theoretically possible - but we need to be precise about this,' said the Professor. 'We could return to Earth and attempt to use my time machine... But I can't guarantee it would work. When Zoonie accidentally sent you, Venus and Zero back to 1875 none of you could remember anything that happened on your return so we can't risk that until I fully understand the principles.'

'And I don't think we should return home until this business is resolved,' added Venus. 'There could be other changes...'

'I agree - but what alternatives do we have?' questioned Steve.

'We could try and break the time barrier in Fireball,' said Mat.

'Oh, come on Professor, let's be realistic,' chided Venus.

'No, no it is possible,' responded Mat. 'It's just being able to do it with any accuracy that's the problem. The theory is that we take Fireball at maximum hyperdrive around the gravity well of a dwarf star. The resultant slingshot effect should distort hyperspace enough to move us forward or backwards in time - if we stay in one piece that is.'

'Can you work out the details Mat?' asked Steve.

'No, but do you remember the mysterious alien we encountered a few years ago on Membrono? We saved his world and he said he would repay us one day... An old civilisation like his might be able to help me. Let's hope he remembers us in this time-line.'

'Membrono it is then folks - plot me a course Mat, and once we're under way let's get some rest. I think we may need it.'

Five days later Fireball XL5 approached the Membrono System only to find no trace of the planet or it's natural satellite where the ancient civilisation Mat had referred to lived.

'This confirms just how vital it is we get back to 1962,' said Mat, standing beside Steve in the main control cabin. 'If we don't change things XL5 is not going to be around to save Membrono from the rogue planet - maybe Popkiss and Beaker lose their research contracts if Mercury and Gibson don't make it back, and space travel doesn't develop as quickly.'

'But what now Mat?' asked Steve. 'You needed the Membronans help to get us back in time.'

'Only to the correct date - it will have to be trial and error from now on.'

'If we are meant to change events in 1962 we'll find our way back somehow Mat,' said Venus joining them.

There's nothing to say we are meant to make it back to the 21st. Century afterwards though,. thought Mat.

'Okay, now we are here we might as well use Membrono's star - her gravitational field is strong enough for our purposes according to my, er, calculations,' said Mat half an hour later in the navigation bay. 'I'll work out the angle of approach and then it's down to you Steve. You must take XL5 in at full power and make a close hyperbolic passage around the star. We should retreat into time and then be hurled forward again by the slingshot effect on the other side of the curve.'

The trick is to cut our acceleration as we pass 1962. We know Membrono would have been destroyed in 2062 without our intervention so that gives us a reference point.'

'Great, Mat. I have every faith in you,' said Steve. 'Okay, strap yourselves in. Once I have the course we'll get this show on the road.'

Steve ran back to the control cabin as Mat double-checked his calculations.

'Once we know how far we have moved in time I'll be able to plot the next jump more accurately,' called Mat over the intercom after giving Steve the course code.

'Full power Robert,' ordered Steve.

'Full power, full power,' repeated the robot in its electronic monotone.

Fireball XL5 hurtled through hyperspace towards the small incredibly dense star at the centre of the Membrono system.

The very existence of their time-line was dependent on the actions of Steve Zodiac and his crew - whether they were pre-ordained or not.

CHAPTER THREE

Steve opened his eyes and quickly closed them again - the pain in his head was unbearable.

Robert sat as alert as ever beside him showing no ill-effects from the slingshot manoeuvre they had just experienced.

'Fire retros Robert, and put XL5 on free float until we find out where and when we are.'

'Fire retros, fire retros,' repeated the robot.

Steve opened the ship's intercom. 'Venus, Mat - are you okay?'

'I feel like I've been kicked by a Martian mule,' groaned Mat from the navigation bay.

'I've felt better, Steve,' added Venus weakly. 'I'll prescribe some painkillers for us.'

'We'll meet in the lounge in five minutes,' ordered Steve.

His headache had subsided slightly but when he rose from his pilot's chair it came back with a vengeance. 'Oh, boy,' he gasped. 'I think I'll give up time travel. It's bad for my...' The cabin swam around him. With iron resolve Steve made it to the lounge and sat waiting for the others.

It was twenty minutes before Mat and Venus arrived. 'I'm sorry Steve,' said Venus, 'but we just couldn't walk.'

'I know how you feel - I think I've just fallen asleep waiting for you, but my head is starting to clear...'

'Here, take two of these,' said Venus, handing Steve some painkillers. 'We've had ours.'

Steve thankfully took the pills with a cup of coffee and all three members of XL5's crew soon began to feel human again.

'The effect on us shows that we physically broke the light barrier - if past experience is anything to go by,' said Venus, referring to the time XL5's motors had gone out of control and they had reached ten times light speed within hyperspace before burn-out occurred - a staggering relative speed of ten thousand times lightspeed in normal space. This time it had been even faster...

'But have we gone back in time?' asked Steve.

'I need to check the star charts,' said Mat. 'I should be able to calculate how far in time we have travelled by comparing the actual positions of the stars to our charts.'

'Great, Mat - in the meantime Venus and I will run a complete diagnostic check on Fireball and see if she suffered any damage during our joy ride.'

Two hours later Mat confirmed they had actually travelled back time - by more than five hundred years!

Steve called an immediate meeting in the lounge again. The good news that XL5 was in one piece and fully operational was overshadowed by their temporal predicament.

'I can now calculate a more accurate point at which to cut our acceleration and we could try again...'

'No, Mat, there must be another way,' cut in Venus. 'Our bodies can't stand up to the punishment of multiple slingshot effects. Just one has weakened us severely - it will be weeks before we fully recover.'

'What other way is there?' asked Steve.

'The Membronans - of course!' exclaimed Mat. 'Now we are back in time their world still exists. They said their civilisation was the oldest in the galaxy - let's go and see if they have the technology to help us.'

Fireball XL5 went into orbit around the planet Membrono soon after and Mat scanned its natural satellite for signs of habitation.

Suddenly two alien spacecraft appeared heading towards the patrol ship - the term 'flying saucer' fitted them perfectly.

'Don't worry Steve, they are a peaceful race,' said Mat over the intercom.

Suddenly missiles flashed towards them from one of the alien vessels.

'You were saying, Mat?' shouted Steve, taking XL5 out of orbit as the missiles got closer - ever closer. 'Prime interceptors, Robert - target enemy missiles... Interceptors one and two - fire!'

Fireball's first line of defence shot away from their launch racks on each side of the ship's nosecone.

'Whew, that was close,' gasped Mat from the navigation bay as the incoming missiles were destroyed with only seconds to spare.

'This is Colonel Steve Zodiac of World Space Patrol ship Fireball XL5 calling Membronan spacecraft - we mean you no harm,' called Steve over the neutroni radio. 'Please respond. We need your help. This is Col- '

'Which planet do you come from?' came a voice next to Steve in the control cabin. It took a few seconds for him to realise it was coming from Robert - but it was not Robert's electronic voice.

'Earth,' responded Steve.

'We do not believe you,' replied the voice. 'Earth is not advanced enough to build spacecraft like yours. We will destroy you unless you tell us the truth and how you found out about our existence.'

'We are from the future - a future where one day we save your world from destruction.'

'We do not believe- '

'Check our computer records,' shouted Steve, sweat beading on his brow.
'Use Robert to access our logs.'

Minutes later the alien voice gave them clearance to follow the Membronan craft down to land on the satellite.

Under the circumstances Steve decided to take the whole ship down and minutes later XL5's three vertical landing rockets lowered the ship onto a featureless plain, flanked by the two alien craft.

'What now?' asked Venus, standing beside Steve in the control cabin.

They both looked warily at Robert - now no longer their trusted mechanical co-pilot but a pawn of the Membronans. Suddenly a high-pitched sound began to fill the air.

'Shut that noise off Steve, please,' gasped Venus feeling her consciousness slipping away for the second time that day.

'I can't - it's... It's coming from Robert. Arghh!'

Robert now rose from the controls and headed for the navigation bay, leaving Steve and Venus out cold.

It was not long before Mat too was sprawled over his circular work station, allowing Robert to transmit all the information in Fireball's computers to the Membronans unhindered.

Steve awoke with a start - aware that an alien presence was probing his mind. He lay in his own quarters aboard Fireball XL5, and a man with long hair and a beard stood beside his bed dressed in dark flowing robes.

'Get out of my head,' roared Steve, sitting up with an effort. 'What have you done with my crew?'

'They are safe,' the alien voice again, but this time Steve heard it in his mind, not through Robert. 'We now believe you are who you say you are. We will help you if we can.'

Relief flooded over Steve like something tangible.

'We apologise for our actions,' said the man, 'but we have kept the knowledge of our civilisation on Membrono's moon a secret from all the other races in the galaxy and have hidden from any passing spacecraft until this day. We did not wish to be contaminated by contact with inferior races - so the knowledge that you will save our world from destruction in the future because we have renounced all weapons and cannot defend ourselves is almost impossible to accept... But we have probed your minds and checked your computer records and all you say is true.'

Steve slowly swung himself out of bed, determined to confirm his crew were unharmed when Venus entered the cabin.

'Steve, how do you feel?' asked the space doctor.

'Great - I love having blackouts. What am I doing in bed?'

'Your resistance to our mind probes was greatest and you have therefore taken longer to recover,' explained the alien voice in Steve's head.

'Come on, let's find Mat,' said Venus. 'He's been discussing our time travel problem with the Membronans.'

'You are not gonna like the solution our friends have come up with,' said Mat as Steve and Venus entered the navigation bay to see him poring over the notes he had just made.

'Try me,' said Steve.

'We fly to Earth, put Fireball into orbit and ourselves into medical stasis until 1962 so we don't get bored.'

'But Professor, that's impossible,' said Venus. 'The stasis fields are designed to keep someone alive for six months at the most - not four hundred years!'

'The Membronans have assured me that with the aid of their technology they can - and the field can be extended to shield the whole ship.'

'Well folks, we don't have any other options,' said Steve grimly.

'That's right Steve,' said Mat.

'I look forward to being woken with a kiss,' said Venus nervously.

'...and that's when the fun will really start,' added Steve.



CHAPTER FOUR

Professor Rudolf Popkiss reached across his desk and changed the calendar to read September 1962. He sat back in his chair and gazed out of the lab windows at the great bulk of Super-R, the revolutionary spacecraft he and his friend and colleague Doctor Horatio Beaker had designed and built for NASA. It sat on purpose-built launch rails that stretched away across the Nevada desert for as far as the eye could see. The size of Super-R dwarfed the Black Rock laboratory that had been his home ever since he had arrived in America in 1929 - the rocket was the culmination of his dreams which had begun with the completion of Supercar two years ago. Super-R would put man on the Moon by the end of the year, and then the exploration of the solar system could begin...

His thoughts were broken by his test-pilot Mike Mercury entering the lab from Supercar's workshop. 'It's the big day tomorrow, Professor.'

'Yes, Mike. Let's hope we have no more sabotage attempts by Masterspy - we were lucky to survive the last one.'

'Good job we had Supercar aboard that time,' added Mike as he looked over at the calendar - was it really three weeks since they had both taken an unexpected trip around the Moon in Super-R? He relived the events in his mind's eye. The anchor bolts designed to stop the craft moving while the rocket motors were tested had sheared under the strain and Mike had been forced to take-off. There had only been enough fuel aboard for the tests so Mike and Popkiss had soon found themselves drifting in space. Using some of Supercar's fuel they had positioned Super-R into a trajectory that had taken them around the Moon and back to Earth. They had managed to refill Super-R's tanks with fuel launched into orbit by NASA and make a controlled vertical landing back at Black Rock as if nothing had gone wrong.

It was soon discovered that Masterspy and his assistant Zarin had replaced the anchor bolts with ones of made of a lower grade metal in the hope of

destroying the spaceship and discrediting the Supercar team. In fact their actions had proven the rocket spaceworthy ahead of schedule and helped bring the date for a Moon-landing forward.

Mike cursed himself again for not having captured Masterspy and his sidekick when the villains hideout in the hills had been discovered - it had been a mistake to leave them to the police who they had somehow avoided yet again. He would bet any money on the fact that Masterspy was still out in the hills waiting for another chance to destroy Super-R for his Eastern paymasters.

They must all be vigilant tonight as it would be the last chance to sabotage the fully-fuelled test flight that was to take place at 0900hrs. tomorrow - if it had not already been carried out thought Mike pessimistically.

'Better get to bed early tonight, Mike,' said Popkiss, breaking the test-pilot's reverie.

'Sure, Professor. Jimmy and I are just going to collect Bill in Supercar,' said Mike, referring to his Super-R co-pilot on loan from NASA who was also Jimmy Gibson's older brother and long-time friend of the Supercar team. NASA had taken a lot of convincing before they had accepted Mike Mercury as the pilot and mission commander of Super-R but Doctor Beaker and Professor Popkiss had insisted he was the only choice they would accept if the rocket was to be built by them in the Nevada desert.

Mike had requested Bill as his co-pilot in a political move to calm things down between NASA and Black Rock - knowing that his friend would jump at the chance to be one of the first men to land on the Moon. NASA had agreed and Bill, one of their newest astronauts had spent the last two months in rigorous training at Cape Canaveral - so rigorous in fact that Mike winced whenever he thought about it.

Supercar rose through the roof doors of its workshop and within seconds was heading for Cape Canaveral, almost 2,500 miles away.

'We'll be there and back in less than two hours,' said Mike as Supercar reached her full speed of three thousand miles per hour.

'That's fast, Mike,' said Jimmy sitting beside the test pilot, 'but nothing compared to the speeds Super-R will reach.'

'That's right. She needs to reach 25,000 miles per hour just to escape the pull of the Earth's gravity.'

'I never thought you and Bill would be the first men to land on the Moon when I joined the Supercar team,' said Jimmy.

'Life is full of surprises,' said Mike.

Suddenly Supercar was diving out of control and Mike was wrestling to pull her up. 'Hold on Jimmy,' he said from between clenched teeth as they dropped like a stone. They could see Salt Lake Flats below them getting closer by the second.

It took all Mike's considerable skill to bring Supercar under his control again and they skimmed the surface of the Great Salt Lake before he finally managed to regain altitude.

'What happened Mike?' gasped Jimmy, looking pale. 'I didn't think we were gonna make it that time.'

'I'll let you into a secret Jim - neither did I,' said Mike, wiping the sweat off his brow. 'And 'I don't know' is the answer to your question.'

Jimmy could see Mike looked worried; perhaps more worried than he'd ever seen him look before.

The rest of the journey went without a hitch and they picked up Bill and arrived back at Black Rock before noon.

Doctor Beaker and Professor Popkiss checked Supercar over thoroughly after being told what had happened but found absolutely nothing wrong with the wonder craft.

'If it had, ah, been anybody else at the controls, Mike,' said Beaker as they all sat down to their evening meal, 'I would have said it could only have been pilot error.' Beaker looked Mike straight in the eye as he said it.

'Don't let NASA hear you say that,' said Mike with a wry grin.

'Let's forget it now, eh?' said Popkiss, looking over at Beaker. 'I see you've burnt the toast again,' he added thoughtfully.

'I remember Mitch always liked toast and marmalade,' laughed Bill, referring to his brother's pet monkey who sat in a corner of the room munching away at a bunch of bananas. Mitch grunted, eeked and scratched himself upon hearing his name.

Everyone was in bed by ten-thirty, ready for the test flight the following day - everyone except the security guards supplied by NASA that now patrolled the laboratory grounds and launch rail.

In a small cave in the Nevada hills only two miles from the Black Rock laboratory and workshops two men lurked surrounded by advanced listening and surveillance equipment - Masterspy and Zarin.

'Mercury never guessed we had more than one hideout in these hills,' laughed Masterspy, his fat features wobbling with mirth.

'Do you think they have detected the drug we put in Super-R's water tanks?' questioned his assistant timidly.

'Of course not, friend Zarin,' answered Masterspy confidently. It had been a stroke of genius to drug Super-R's drinking water the night they had replaced the anchor bolts in case their act of sabotage failed, as indeed it had. They had not been able to get near the spaceship since with the higher

level of security now in force. 'Don't forget it's colourless, odourless and tasteless,' added Masterspy with glee. 'And it needs adrenaline as a catalyst to trigger the blackouts - I'm sure there will be plenty of that flowing during take-off tomorrow.'

It occurred to him that Mercury must already have drunk some of the drugged water while carrying out pre-flight checks aboard Super-R - the test pilot might even have experienced a minor blackout or two which he would have put down to tiredness, but once out in space...

'An astronaut should never fall asleep at the controls. I will miss Mike Mercury - I would have liked to say goodbye.' Masterspy's evil laughter echoed around the cave and was soon joined by Zarin's sniggering.



CHAPTER FIVE

Mike's sleep was troubled - he kept thinking about Supercar going out of control. Was it pilot error? He could remember the thrill of soaring up into the morning sky feeling good to be alive and chatting to Jimmy. The next thing he knew Supercar had gone into a steep dive he had been lucky to pull out of. What had gone wrong?

Everyone rose at six-thirty and had breakfast. It was another beautiful cloud-free morning over Nevada and Mike and Bill looked out at Super-R shining in the sunlight.

The security boys reported no sign of attempted sabotage and the NASA engineers and technicians began the final pre-launch checks under Popkiss and Beaker's supervision at seven-thirty.

'We'd better get into our space-suits and be ready to board Super-R in thirty minutes,' said Mike to Bill, looking at their launch schedule. Bill hugged Jimmy who was looking at his big brother with pride.

'A pity Mom and Dad couldn't have been alive to see this day,' said Jimmy, with a tear forming in his eye.

'Charging port engines,' called Mike from Supercar's cockpit ten minutes later. 'Twelve thousand... fourteen thousand... fifteen thousand. Interlock on. Fire One!' The port engines roared into life. 'Charging starboard engines. Ten thousand... fourteen thousand... fifteen thousand. Interlock on. Fire Two!' The starboard engines followed suit. 'Selecting full boost vertical.'

The roof doors were opened by Professor Popkiss and Supercar rose majestically up into the blue sky. Mike Mercury and Bill Gibson were boarding in style. They flew low over the entire length of Super-R before

Mike lowered Supercar into the specially constructed hold within the revolutionary spaceship, marvelling at its sleek and powerful lines for the umpteenth time.

He would have expected nothing less from the creative genius of Popkiss and Beaker - Mike was proud to be associated with them.

Eight a.m. and the final countdown for the test flight had begun.

The temperature in the control cabin began to rise as the Nevada sun blazed down on Super-R. Mike and Bill were grateful for the ship's chilled drinking water as they carried out their pre-flight instrument checks even if they did have to imbibe through a straw from sealed plastic bags in readiness for leaving Earth's gravity. Mike tried not to think of the fact that all Super-R's water would have to be recycled on long term missions.

The countdown continued without a hitch until only sixty seconds remained. 'Good luck Bill, good luck Mike,' called Jimmy over the radio link with the Black Rock laboratory.

Then there were only ten seconds left - Doctor Beaker read them out for all to hear. At precisely nine a.m. Super-R's rockets fired and the spaceship began to move along her launch rails, slowly at first but getting faster all the time. The noise was deafening within the Supercar workshop where Popkiss, Beaker, Jimmy and Mitch the Monkey watched the take-off on a specially rigged monitor screen. They saw Super-R begin to lift from the rails and then she was soaring away into the sky, climbing faster than any jet plane.

The roar of the spaceship's rockets slowly diminished but could still be heard long after they had lost sight of Super-R. Everyone who had worked on the project at Black Rock was cheering now - the small team of NASA engineers and technicians, the security guards and to Jimmy's surprise even Popkiss and Beaker. The two scientists were shouting and cheering with the best of them.

Come back safely, thought Jimmy, wishing he could be with his brother and Mike, going on the trip of a lifetime.

Mike and Bill felt the G forces push them back deep into their seats and every move was an effort as Super-R continued to accelerate away from the Earth heading for outer space. In ten minutes they would reach escape velocity and cut all motors before correcting their trajectories for an orbital flight around the Moon.

'Something is wrong, Popkiss,' said Doctor Beaker ten minutes later. Super-R had continued to accelerate away from Earth - and she had not cut her motors!

'Mike, come in Mike,' called Popkiss over the radio link. There was no answer.

'Mike, this is Beaker,' shouted the doctor over his colleague's shoulder. 'You must cut your motors now Mike.'

Still no answer.

'Calm down, Beaker,' said Popkiss, trying to follow his own advice.

'The-the motors must be out of control,' said Beaker, half to himself.

'If they couldn't cut the motors, Beaker,' said Popkiss quietly, 'then the G forces would have continued to build. Mike and Bill must be unconscious, and there is nothing we can do to help them...'

Popkiss's dream was turning into a nightmare.

CHAPTER SIX

World Space Patrol ship Fireball XL5 had come out of stasis two days earlier in preparation for this moment. She had been in orbit around the Earth for four hundred years and yet to Steve and his crew it was as if they had only arrived yesterday.

Mat had monitored the launch sequence from the navigation bay - he could hardly believe they were now in 1962 at one of the critical moments in mankind's history. 'Here she comes, Steve,' he called over the ship's intercom.

'Let me know at the first sign of trouble,' responded Steve from the control cabin of XL5.

They all knew what had to be done to re-establish their timeline - but how to achieve it was another matter.

Mat focused the astrascope on Super-R, this time it was no wreck he was looking at. 'She's reached escape velocity - but she hasn't cut her motors,' shouted Mat excitedly. 'This is it, Steve. Super-R is still accelerating away into space, and she'll end up where we found her in 2064 unless we do something.'

'Okay, Mat, I get the picture,' said Steve. 'First we've got to cut the telemetry link with Earth. We can't risk anybody detecting our presence out here.'

'Right, Steve,' called Mat. 'I suggest a blast missile. The pulse of energy should knock out all of Super-R's primitive radio equipment.'

'Won't Earth detect the blast?' asked Venus entering the control cabin and standing behind Steve's chair.

'Sure but hopefully they'll think it's Super-R's motors exploding,' said Steve before turning to his robot co-pilot. 'Robert, prime blast missile and fire on my command.'

'Prime blast missile, prime blast missile,' repeated the robot.

'Fire!' ordered Steve.

The missile sped away from Fireball and locked onto Super-R, exploding only seconds later at a pre-programmed distance from its target.

'I'm taking XL5 out of orbit and giving chase,' decided Steve.

Minutes later Fireball was drawing up alongside the runaway Super-R.

'We've got to change her course,' stated Mat as he looked out of the navigation bay ports in awe at the infamous rocket-ship. 'She must crash down in the Pacific Ocean at 1304 Eastern Standard Time if we are going to correct history.'

'We've also got to board her somehow and get those two astronauts into Supercar so they are ready to fly to safety as Super-R re-enters Earth's atmosphere,' added Steve from the control cabin.

'We can't use the thruster packs while she's still accelerating,' reminded Venus.

'I know,' muttered Steve, holding XL5 steady beside Super-R. They had approximately two hours and forty-five minutes left before she was due to plunge into a watery grave according to their version of history.

'Okay, folks,' said Steve after a few seconds deliberation. 'This is what we're gonna do...'

'We're in position now,' shouted Steve five minutes later.

'I hope you know what you're doing,' responded Mat nervously. 'One slip and we needn't worry about the future anymore...'

'Release the magnetic clamps Mat and stop worrying - you'll make me nervous.'

'Clamps away and... Locked-on! All locked-on.'

Steve had rolled Fireball XL5 through one-hundred-and-eighty degrees about her longitudinal axis and was now flying her parallel to Super-R's underside; the bellies of the two craft were separated by less than two feet. Four six-inch thick cahelium hawsers secured by the most powerful electromagnets that 21st. Century technology could produce held the ships in a deadly embrace.

'Okay, Mat, Venus,' called Steve, visibly sweating, 'I'm cutting motors and winching in the hawsers...'

'Gently Steve, gently,' said Mat almost to himself as they were drawn closer and closer to the historic rocket ship... And then with the slightest impact XL5 was riding 'pick-a-back' beneath Super-R at over 25,000 miles per hour, and they were still accelerating.

'You did it, Steve! You did it!' gasped Venus, wanting to hug him.

'I don't want to do that again in a hurry,' muttered Steve, wiping his brow. 'Right Mat, you'd better get busy on that crash-down course for Super-R while Venus and I board her.'

'Roger Steve,' replied Mat. 'If this acceleration holds steady we need to be ready to correct her trajectory at eleven forty-seven precisely.'

'Grab you medical kit Venus,' ordered Steve, 'and I'll meet you in the ejection bay in three minutes - we've got to work fast.'

Leaving Robert at the controls Steve and Venus were standing on the underside of Super-R ten minutes later, having taken their oxygen pills before leaving Fireball. They wore magnetic sole plates which ensured they did not drift away from the rocket ship's hull and were connected to XL5 by two life-lines - thruster packs being useless in this situation because of the

constant acceleration they were still subject to. The possibility of 'falling' into Super-R's rocket exhaust was too horrific to contemplate.

'There should be an airlock in this directions,' said Venus, pointing ahead. 'I studied the plans Mat called up on the computer when he first realised this was Super-R.'

'Great,' said Steve. 'I'd rather not use the laser cutter unless we have to.'

'There - it's over there. I can see the airlock,' said Venus, pointing again.

Steve and Venus made their way carefully across the hull until they reached the small airlock. They firmly fixed their lifelines beside the entrance and entered Super-R.

With a feeling of de-ja-vu the World Space Patrol officers made their way to the rocket ship's control cabin and found Mike Mercury and Bill Gibson unconscious in the same positions in which they had discovered their mummified remains. It seemed like an age ago, and yet subjectively only three days had passed since that fateful encounter on the edge of the solar system.

'They're alive, Steve,' said Venus after monitoring the astronauts' life-signs, 'but they're both in a deep state of unconsciousness - almost a coma. If it wasn't so incredible I'd say they were drugged.'

'That's why they didn't cut their motors,' reasoned Steve, looking at the control cabin's instrument display. The temperature gauges were reading dangerously high as Super-R continued to accelerate and the needles were still rising. It would be touch and go as to whether they could correct her trajectory before the motors exploded.

'Let's get Mercury and Gibson to Supercar,' said Venus. Cursing the acceleration-induced 'gravity' they carried the space-suited figures out of

the control cabin and down the long corridor to the special hold where Supercar was stored.

Steve breathed a sigh of relief once the two unconscious astronauts were sitting in Supercar, but then it occurred to him that their problems were not yet over. 'Venus, how do we bring these guys around just at the right moment to fly to safety?'

'We can't Steve. If they are drugged they will need time to recover. I can give them detox and a stimulant but I can't guarantee exactly how long it will take to be effective. What are we going to do?'

'I'll have to fly Supercar to safety,' realised Steve.

'But you...'

'No buts, Venus. I can handle her. Get back to XL5 and let Mat know what the situation is. I'll be ready to fly out of here at twelve-thirty EST. Super-R should have re-entered Earth's atmosphere by then if everything goes to plan.' He checked his wrist chronometer. 'You'd better get back to XL5; you need to help Mat turn this baby in fifteen minutes.'

'Good luck, Steve,' called Venus as she ran back towards the airlock.

Steve was left with just over one hour in which to figure out how to fly Supercar, not to mention having to find a way out of the hold. Supercar was designed for vertical take-off so logically there must be an external hatchway above it which opened automatically - he hoped. He was not going to get much help from his unconscious companions, that was for sure...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Everything hinged on the course correction Mat had just relayed to Robert the Robot who sat as impassively as ever in XL5's control cabin, ready to obey his human masters' commands without question.

'Only two minutes to go, Professor,' said Venus, now occupying Steve's pilot's seat beside Robert.

'Better strap yourself in, Venus,' called Mat over the intercom from the navigation bay. 'It could be a rough ride if Super-R's motors blow or the magnetic clamps come adrift under the strain.'

'Okay, Mat,' replied Venus, 'but why couldn't we have shut down her motors and used Super-R's directional jets to turn her?'

'Too risky,' said Mat. 'We need XL5's computers and precise handling to pull this off and Super-R must maintain her present acceleration if she's gonna crash down at thirteen-oh-four hours. If those motors blow we really are in trouble.'

'I hope Steve will be okay,' said Venus almost to herself as Robert operated the controls that fired Fireball's own rocket motors.

'Use full power, Robert,' shouted Mat a few seconds later when he could see the robot's attempts to turn the combined mass of Super-R and XL5 was taking longer than he had expected.

Suddenly a tremendous lurch overrode Fireball's artificial gravity for a few seconds - one of the magnetic clamps had broken free!

'Venus, get back here quickly,' called Mat, realising what had happened. 'You've gotta help me relocate that clamp before another one fails.'

'I can do it from here, Professor,' responded Venus, already operating the winch controls to move the hawser back into place. 'You worry about the

course change - I can handle this.' She did not feel half as confident as she hoped she sounded.

Seconds later the clamp was back in place and the hawser winched tight again.

'I've reversed the polarity of the neutron flow - they should hold now,' reported the Doctor. 'How's the course coming Mat?'

'We're not gonna make it,' replied Mat desperately. 'Super-R's motors are too powerful - we're not gonna turn her in time.'

'Don't give up Mat, don't give- '

Super-R's motors erupted in a tremendous white-hot explosion. The energy released vaporised her main motor assembly and threw the two ships into a spiralling trajectory back towards Earth.

It took Mat a few minutes to clear his head and fully appreciate the consequences of what had happened. 'You're not gonna believe this Venus - Venus, are you there Venus?'

'Yes, Mat - I-I think so. What hit us Professor?'

'Super-R's motors exploded and... And the force of the blast has completed our course change!'

'That's wonderful Mat. It's as if fate is lending a hand.'

'Not that wonderful Venus. You see, we've lost the acceleration we needed for Super-R to crash down on time.'

'What can we do? We can't be defeated now.'

'Only one thing we can do,' said Mat morosely. 'Go down with Super-R. Use Fireball's motors to give her the thrust she needs.'

'Is there no other way?' asked Venus, shocked.

'No other way. I wish there was.'

Mat gave Robert instructions to fire XL5's boosters and regain their previous acceleration.

If there was any way to save Fireball from crashing down into the Pacific Ocean with Super-R at 13.04hrs. Eastern Standard Time they had less than sixty minutes to think of it.

With no artificial gravity aboard Super-R Steve was glad he had used the seat belts in Supercar when the rocket's motors blew. Supercar was clamped to the floor of the hold but its occupants were subject to the full effects of inertia and would have been thrown out of the open cockpit if it hadn't been for their seat belts. Steve felt like he had been kicked by a Martian mule and thought Mike Mercury and Bill Gibson were the lucky ones - at least they were unconscious and hadn't felt a thing.

He looked at his chronometer again. In twenty minutes he had to be ready to fly out of here - if Super-R held together that long.

Steve resisted the temptation to use Supercar's transmitter to contact Fireball and find out what the hell was going on. The risk of being picked up by Earth was too great - they must maintain radio silence.

He took another oxygen pill and double-checked that Supercar's oxygen tanks were fully-charged; he didn't want his two famous passengers suffocating before they reached the lower atmosphere and were able to breath naturally.

Fifteen minutes to go and Steve felt fairly confident he now understood Supercar's controls enough to fly her. He had to time this just right. If he left Super-R too soon Supercar could bounce off Earth's atmosphere and be stranded in space - too late and they might not have enough height to make a safe landing and could even burn up in the denser atmosphere. That was one fireball he wanted no part of.

Steve sat watching the minutes tick away, blissfully unaware of the sacrifice his crew were preparing to make to re-establish their time line.

In Fireball XL5 Mat had not said a word since ordering Robert to maintain Super-R's acceleration. 'There could be one chance, Venus,' he said, looking up from his calculations suddenly.

Venus had given up hope in the last ten minutes as she watched Earth getting closer and closer through the control cabin's canopy - she found it difficult to concentrate on Mat's words over the intercom.

'Venus, listen to me. In five minutes Steve will leave Super-R in Supercar... As soon as he is away we double our acceleration for twelve minutes and then we release the clamps and fly clear.'

'But Mat, what about the timing. If we increase our speed Super-R won't crash down when the history books said she did.'

'Think about it Venus - as soon as we release Super-R her velocity will remain constant but the increased acceleration will compensate for that and if my calculations are correct she'll still crash down at 13.04. There's just one snag, though.'

'What's that, Mat?'

'We could still crash down ourselves if we can't pull Fireball up in time after we separate. It'll be close Venus.'

Mat had decided not to mention the fact that their heat shields might also fail as they dived into Earth's atmosphere because of the extra thrust required to pull this off.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Twelve-thirty, Eastern Standard Time. XL5 and Super-R plunged as one into the upper limits of Earth's atmosphere as planned.

Ten minutes earlier Steve Zodiac had closed Supercar's cockpit and started her engines. He had charged them both as high as possible before firing but had overlooked the interlock and there was a growing vibration as the power fluctuated.

Steve had found the control to open the hatchway out of the hold - as he had suspected it was directly above Supercar.

And now it was twelve-thirty. He operated the vertical take-off jets - and nothing happened! Droplets of sweat appeared on Steve's brow as he frantically sought the reason, then it occurred to him. He had to release the magnetic clamps holding Supercar to the deck. Logically they should be with the controls that opened the hatchway - yes that must be it. Steve flicked a switch and Supercar shot upwards through the opened hatchway much faster than he had intended.

Supercar had the same velocity as Super-R but Steve knew the rocket ship was still accelerating and they had to avoid colliding with it as she hurtled past on her way to meet her fate.

He fired Supercar's forward thrusters and felt the unnerving vibrations build through the control bar as the marvel of this earlier age pulled away from the immediate danger of not only collision but being incinerated by the blazing exhaust gases being released by... XL5's motors?! Fireball was still clamped to the underside of Super-R! What in Jupiter had gone wrong?

Steve tried to control Supercar's descent and reduce her speed but he couldn't take his eyes off his ship as it dived towards disaster. Mat... Venus... They were both plunging to their deaths and he could not do a thing about it.

Supercar's cabin temperature began to rise as the atmosphere became denser. Steve realised he would have to fly around the world at least three times in a descending orbit to reduce speed enough for a safe landing - well a landing, anyway.

The vibrations were getting worse due to the imbalance of power in Supercar's engines - Steve just hoped she wouldn't shake herself apart before he found out what he was doing wrong.

He kept seeing Venus's face as he tried to concentrate on Supercar's controls...

'Robert, release the magnetic clamps now, before it's too late,' ordered Professor Matic over the intercom.

Venus, still occupying Steve's pilot's seat in the main control cabin watched the robot carry out his instructions after repeating the order. 'Quickly, Robert!' urged Venus, watching the Earth looming closer.

'Release the clamps. Release the clamps,' repeated Robert again.

'One clamp has stuck, Mat,' informed Venus, interpreting the information on the control panel beside her. 'Must be the heat - welded the clamp to Super-R,' realised Mat. 'Robert, operate the emergency hawser release and take us out of this dive as soon as we're free. No need to repeat that Robert - just do it quickly!'

'Do it quickly, do it quickly,' repeated Robert and a few wisps of coolant vapour were released from the valve in the top of the robot's head as his circuits momentarily overheated.

Don't blow your top now Robert thought Venus as thankfully the robot carried out his orders.

Robert fired Fireball's retros as soon as the hawser fell away from the patrol ship, still attached to Super-R. He fired them again but XL5 continued

to dive with increasing speed towards the Earth and the temperature gauges in the control cabin all soared past danger level.

Venus and Mat watched horrified as they broke through the cloud cover and hurtled towards oblivion - at the last moment Robert gained control of the patrol ship and she was climbing back towards the stars.

Super-R plunged into the calm Pacific Ocean at exactly 13:04 EST. The divergent time line had been erased.

'We only just made it, Mat,' gasped Venus a few minutes later after instructing Robert to put Fireball into orbit again.

'I- I know,' said Mat shakily. 'Let's hope Steve can land Supercar safely in the Nevada Desert. We'll leave Robert in Central Control and take Fireball Junior down to collect him.'

'I'll bring my medical kit so I can check Mercury and Gibson over,' added Venus. 'If they come round before we get Steve back I'll have to suppress their memories - they mustn't know about our involvement in any of this.'

Supercar was still in one piece and was now flying at just under two thousand miles per hour some sixty thousand feet above the Western United States. Steve Zodiac was confident he could bring her into to land, though he was still worried about that damned vibration in the motors...

Suddenly the engines stalled and nothing Steve could do would get them started again. Supercar began to lose height rapidly and it took every ounce of skill he had to hold the craft steady. It looked as if they were going to end up joining Super-R and XL5 in a watery grave - but Mercury and Gibson had survived, damn it!

Determination welled up within Steve. It wasn't just his passengers lives that were at stake but the very fabric of time itself. Mat and Venus had

given their lives to ensure Super-R met her true destiny; now it was his turn - he had to save the rocket's crew.

Steve found the controls that extended Supercar's wings more by luck than judgement. The short stubby wings gave the small craft just enough lift to glide - but eventually Supercar would drop like a stone if he could not restart her engines.

'Console to pilot. Console to pilot. Come in Mike. Mike, please answer me, over.'

Steve realised he had switched the radio receiver on as well as extending the wings. He dare not answer the voice with the slight - German? - accent that kept repeating the same words over and over again.

Then the message changed:

'Mike, if you can hear me and are injured I can bring you in to land on remote control. You are flying dangerously low - please switch to remote so I can take over. For pity's sake answer me.'

Steve realised this was his only chance. He spotted the switch marked 'remote' and flicked it down.

'They're alive, Beaker, they're alive! Look, Beaker - they're gliding. I'm restarting the engines!'

Steve felt a surge of power as Supercar's engines fired, and this time there was no vibration. He watched amazed as Supercar appeared to fly itself, climbing to a safer height and changing direction, heading back for Black Rock. He was not sure how long the journey would take but as soon as the Supercar workshop came into view he had to be ready to switch off remote and land manually a few miles from the base; he must then get as far away from Supercar as possible so as not to be implicated in the Super-R disaster. Then what? He was a stranger here, lost in an alien world. His friends were dead and there was no way of returning to his own time.

The future was safe, but he would never see it again...

The voice with the German accent came over the radio again. 'Mike, you are almost home. I hope you and Bill both got out of Super-R. If you look to your left you should see the laboratory in a few minutes.'

Steve had to cut the remote control now! He flicked the switch up and felt Supercar falter slightly before control was returned to his hands again. He increased Supercar's speed and overshot the workshop, flying on over the desert hills.

'What's going on, Mike?' came the voice again. 'Put Supercar back onto remote. If you are injured you could crash. Mike? Mi- ' Steve switched the radio off.

He felt sorry for causing the man who had saved his life so much unnecessary concern but it could not be helped.

Steve could see caves below him and decided to attempt a landing - he was sure the Black Rock laboratory guys would have a good fix on Supercar by now and Mercury and Gibson would be found in hours once he put down. He would hide in the caves until Supercar had been removed and then decide what to do next.

He cut Supercar's vertical landing jets a few seconds too soon and the craft landed heavily, but still in one piece.

He heard Mike Mercury groan and saw Bill Gibson beginning to move too - they were coming round. Steve knew they must not see him. He quickly opened the cockpit and climbed out, only to hear voices coming from the cave he had landed by.

He threw himself down beside Supercar so as not to be seen and watched as two men came out of the cave and stared in amazement when they saw the marvel of the age before them.

'Spledunkitz,' gasped the fat man. 'I don't believe it! I just don't believe it. I just don't believe it, friend Zarin.'

'Look, Masterspy - Mercury will see us!' shrieked Zarin.

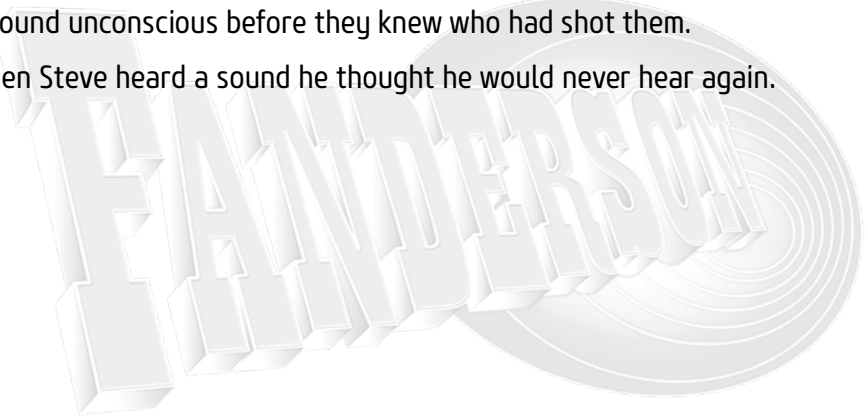
Steve saw Masterspy pull a gun from his shoulder-holster and walk towards Supercar.

'If doping Super-R's water didn't kill them, this will.'

'Quickly, before they come round,' encouraged Zarin.

Steve Zodiac could not let this happen. He drew his coma ray gun and fired twice. The rays enveloped their targets and the two men dropped to the ground unconscious before they knew who had shot them.

Then Steve heard a sound he thought he would never hear again.



EPILOGUE

Fireball Junior came into land beside Supercar, the roar of the jets slowly dying away. Seconds later Mat and Venus lifted out of the small spacecraft on their jetmobiles and were soon shaking hands and hugging their skipper.

'Mat, Venus - I just don't believe it!' gasped Steve, almost lost for words. 'I saw you plunging to your doom still clamped to Super-R. How did...?'

'It's quite a story Steve,' said Venus.

'Come on you two,' called Mat. 'We've got to get out of here. I detected two helicopters coming this way as we landed. They'll be here any minute.'

'Who are those guys, Steve?' asked Venus as Steve climbed onto her jetmobile behind the doctor.

'I heard them say they'd drugged Super-R's water - they are the cause of all this, Venus.'

'Let's hope no-one realises they have been shot with a coma ray a hundred years before it was - will be - invented,' said Venus as she and Steve flew back up to Fireball Junior's open hatchway, followed closely by Mat.

Steve felt relieved to be sitting at controls he was familiar with again as he operated Fireball Junior's vertical take-off jets and in less than a minute they were on their way to re-join XL5 in orbit.

'Whew! We made it,' said Mat with feeling.

The blue sky gradually darkened as they left the atmosphere behind them. Steve locked onto XL5's homing signal and soon Fireball's main body could be seen from the control cabin with the naked eye.

Ten minutes later the two craft had docked and Steve and his crew sat in XL5's lounge drinking much needed coffee. 'Well, we've succeeded in

ensuring Super-R crashed back to Earth and in rescuing Mercury and Gibson,' he said.

'I doubt if we could have done anything else,' said Venus thoughtfully.

'It's a mind-boggling concept but I believe Venus is right,' added Mat. 'We were destined to return to 1962 and correct the time line - there is no way we could have avoided it.'

'That means there is no such thing as free will and all our actions have been mapped out for us from the moment we are born to the moment we die?' concluded Steve.

'Yeah, frightening, isn't it?' responded the Professor.

'You will sure have a lot to tell your Uncle Felix about when you next see him Venus,' said Steve. 'He'll be able to rewrite his book on the Super-R disaster.'

'I'll never see him again unless we can return to 2064,' said Venus soberly.

'What do you suggest Mat?' asked Steve. 'How do we get back to our own time?'

'The only way I can guarantee the right year is by using the Membronan stasis field again.'

'I agree Mat, but we can't stay in Earth orbit in case we are detected. I suggest we return to Membrono and look up our old friend and ask him to put us up for a century or so. His future self did say he was in our debt and would repay us one day.'

The End