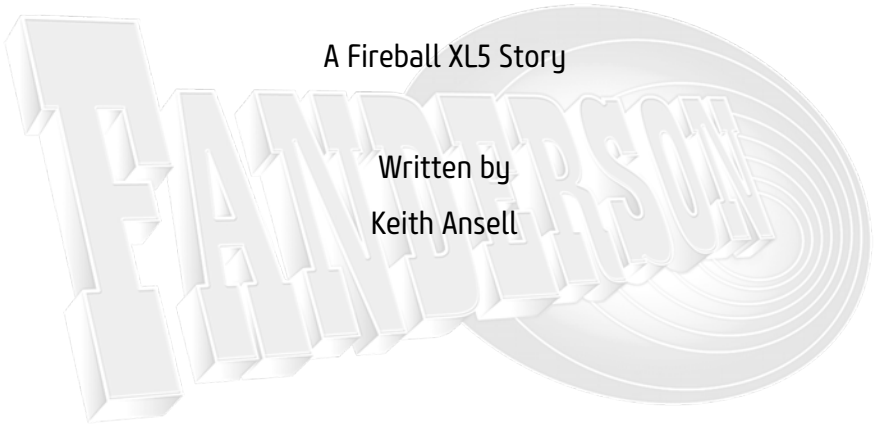


# RETURN TO ZANADU

A Fireball XL5 Story

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## **Prologue**

Major Jim Ireland woke up screaming. He could feel the searing heat of the explosions ripping into his body as the Great Dome of the Kudos Emperors collapsed around him.

Then his eyes opened and he realised he had been having a nightmare - the same nightmare that had plagued him ever since his return from Zanadu over a year ago.

The mental link with which the last of the Zanadus had controlled him was broken the moment Steve Zodiac violated the Frozen Fountain of Life - but an empathic bond had still remained. In the few brief moments before death claimed Kudos the rapidly ageing alien had shared the anger and pain of dying with Jim - and they were now indelibly stamped in the Major's memory. He realised as he slowly drifted off to sleep again that the only way to rid himself of these bad dreams was to return to their source:

Zanadu!

So beautiful - but oh, so evil...

## Chapter 1

The Invasion of the Fishmen was finally over and the crew of Fireball XL5 was enjoying a well-earned period of leave from patrol duty.

Colonel Steve Zodiac sat in the lounge of Venus' newly rebuilt beach-house watching the minutes tick by on the wall clock beside him.

'Come on, Venus. We've got to get back to Space City. Jim's plane is due to arrive in ten minutes.'

'I'm coming, Steve,' called the Doctor of Space Medicine from her bedroom. 'You want me to look my best for your friend, don't you?'

'You always look great - now come on.'

'Why, thank you Colonel Zodiac. I think that's the first time you've ever told me so.'

Venus came into the lounge dressed in a white off-the-shoulder blouse and a red, flowing knee length skirt; the effect was striking.

Steve realised just how lovely Venus was as he grabbed her hand and pulled her quickly to his waiting hovercar on the drive outside - he was a lucky guy to have her as one of his crew. Who said you couldn't have beauty and brains?

'What about Zoonie?' asked Venus as they jumped into the car.

'He'll be okay. We'll be back here before he gets hungry.'

Steve and Venus shot along the highway towards Space City at full speed. Steve had received a call from Jim the previous day to say he was coming - and that he had to talk to him urgently.

Jim Ireland had kept a pretty low profile since returning from his ten year exploration of the local star systems - a period in which developments in the hyperdrive had overtaken him.

The World Government had ordered a clampdown on the events which took place on Zanadu - a planet with an evil reputation and avoided prior to the Major landing there.

Jim's honorary membership of the World Space Patrol had allowed him to get flight clearance out to Space City when the media reported XL5's return from patrol.

Steve and Venus watched Jim land his private jet on the Tower apron as the colonel's yellow hovercar pulled up in the nearby car park. Steve ran over to the 'plane and shook Jim's hand warmly after the famous explorer had jumped down from the cockpit.

'How are you Jim? It's good to see you again. I hope you've brought less baggage this time. My back hasn't been the same since I last helped you off-load your spaceship - Jim! What's wrong?'

Jim Ireland looked pale. His grip on Steve's hand was weak - not like the major of old.

'I must return to Zanadu,' gasped the explorer. 'You've got to help me, Steve. It's the only way to stop the... the bad dreams I keep having.'

Steve looked his old friend straight in the eye as he spoke. 'I'm sorry, Jim. Zanadu is off-limits since our last trip there - to stop the secrets of the Kudos Empire being plundered and used against us.'

'No. No!' screamed Jim, struggling to maintain his composure. 'I must return there. I must!' His face was bathed in sweat.

'You need medical help, Jim,' said Steve, gripping the major's shoulder.

Jim shrugged him off. 'You must take me to Zanadu in XL5 - please. If our friendship means anything. Please...'

'I can't, Jim,' said Steve, shaking his head solemnly. Something in the major seemed to snap; he reached for his ray gun. Steve swung his fist and hit Jim hard on the jaw - his friend sank to the ground before the gun was drawn.

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'Venus - help me with him. We've got to get him to the Medical Centre. He's ill.'

Venus ran over to Steve - she couldn't believe what had just happened.

'I hope you don't punch all your old friends like that!'

'They don't all try to shoot me, Venus,' answered Steve wryly.



## Chapter 2

'You cannot take Major Ireland back to Zanadu and that is final, Zodiac!' bellowed Commander Zero.

'I know it's against regulations, Commander,' said Steve, standing at-ease before Zero's desk in the Control Room the following morning, 'but Jim Ireland is dying.'

'What? Explain yourself, Colonel.'

'Venus carried out every possible medical check she could think of last night. He seems to be in a coma that's getting deeper by the hour. His vital signs are weakening too. If she can't stabilise him soon we'll have to put him in a stasis field to keep him alive.' He paused briefly, before concluding: 'In fact, I think Zanadu may be his only chance.'

'No, Steve. The regulations are quite explicit.'

'I hope you can live with that decision if -'

'Colonel Zodiac,' called Lieutenant Ninety from the other side of the room. 'Doctor Venus wants you in the Medical Centre immediately, sir.'

'I'm on my way,' said Steve, running for the lift.

Zero gritted his teeth. 'Sometimes, if Zodiac wasn't the best darn astronaut I've got, I'd... I'd..'

'You'd what, sir?' asked Ninety innocently.

Zero glared at the lieutenant. 'Shut up and get on with your work.'

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'Yes, sir,' said Ninety, struggling to keep his face straight.

Five minutes later Steve had entered sickbay. He remembered the weeks he had spent there after being shot by the Subterrains' Robot Bird - at least

he didn't have to worry about those green-skinned fiends again. He found the ward where Jim Ireland lay in his bed, hooked up to all manner of electrical apparatus.

Venus, now back in her doctor's uniform, with a white gown over the tunic was monitoring Jim Ireland's vital signs.

'Oh, Steve, I'm glad you're here,' said Venus. 'Something is happening to Jim. According to the scanners he's virtually brain-dead, with only basic autonomic functions left - but look at him. Just look at him...'

Steve saw his old friend becoming more and more agitated - his eyes were moving rapidly below closed lids, muscles in his neck and arms tensing spasmodically.

'Have you tried sedating him?'

'I've tried everything. I -'

Jim Ireland's eyes opened. He wrenched the wires from his forehead, pulled the tubes from his wrists, and stood up beside his bed. There was an unnatural burning glow in his eyes as he looked about him.

The next instant he ran past a shocked Steve and Venus and out of the ward into the corridor beyond.

'Call Security, Venus - and tell Zero what's happened. I'm going after him.'

Steve ran into the corridor. There were only a few medics about and no sign of the major. He ran down to the Reception Hall where a scene of carnage met his startled gaze. The female receptionist and two young medics lay sprawled in pools of blood, their necks obviously broken. The receptionist had evidently tried to reach her telephone to call for help, but the device had been torn from her desk and thrown to the floor.

Two security guards entered the building as Steve stood speechless. 'Doctor Venus called us, sir. She seemed to think there was some trouble -' The man's jaw dropped as he took in the scene.

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'Major Ireland has gone berserk,' explained Steve grimly. 'I want him detained on sight. Stun him if you have to; we don't want any more deaths.'

The guards ran from the Medical Centre in search of their quarry, coma guns drawn.

Steve grabbed a telephone and reported to Commander Zero.

'I'll order Mahoney to double the guard on the launch rail, Steve,' said Zero after taking in the grisly events. 'We can't let Ireland get his hands on a patrol ship.'

Steve looked sadly at the bodies around him. How could Jim Ireland, an old friend and a respected colleague, have done this?

Midday arrived and there was still no sign of the major. Commander Zero was furious. How could a dangerous killer be allowed to roam around one of the world's top-security bases at will? And dressed in a hospital gown, no less.

Security Chief Sergeant Patrick Mahoney would never hear the last of this if his guards didn't catch Ireland soon.



### Chapter 3

Fireball XL7 sat on the launch rails ready to begin her three-month patrol duty of Sector 39. The isotopes in her nuclear reactor had been renewed and the conventional rocket motors were being refuelled under Lieutenant Ninety's supervision.

Captain Ross and his crew had just completed their medical checks and final briefings and were awaiting instructions to board ship.

'XL7 fully refuelled and all readings are A-OK,' reported Lieutenant Ninety from his desk in the Control Room. 'Blast away T-minus 15 minutes and counting.'

'Crew to launch stations,' ordered Commander Zero.

'T-minus 14 minutes,' intoned Ninety.

Ross and his three crew mounted their jetmobiles in the parking lot beside the Control Tower. The colour-coded hover bikes lifted off and Ross led the way along the impressive 300-foot length of XL7, heading towards the main hatchway in his ship's nose cone.

But something was wrong - the hatchway was closed!

'Commander - we've got trouble,' called Ross over his jetmobile radio. 'Abort the launch sequence. I think -'

Suddenly the rockets of the launch trolley exploded into life and Fireball XL7 began to move along the rails, faster, ever faster.

Ross and his shocked crew scattered on their jetmobiles, escaping the sudden blast of heat as the powerful patrol ship hurtled past them.

Nothing could be done to override XL7's controls - everyone in Space City watched helplessly as she reached the end of the mile-long launch rail and climbed the 45° incline at its end.

XL7 left the launch trolley behind and shot up into the sky, heading for outer space. At the controls was Major Jim Ireland, dressed in the uniform of a security guard. There was fresh blood on his hands.

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'XL7 is heading for Sector 12,' reported Lieutenant Ninety, monitoring the radarscope. 'Ireland is obviously on his way to Zanadu, sir.'

'He can't handle a ship like that - he'll kill himself!' roared Zero.

'The pilot of XL7 might look like Jim Ireland, Commander,' explained Venus, entering the Control Room with Steve, 'but the major was effectively brain-dead when I last checked him over. Something has taken over his body - something alien. Ireland is someone's puppet.'

'I just know that something terrible will happen if he reaches Zanadu now,' muttered Steve. 'Commander, you've got to let me try to stop him.'

'Okay, Steve - but you'll never catch him. It will take hours to get XL5 ready for launch.'

'There's one chance,' said Steve. 'Professor Matic has spent his leave aboard Fireball working on some modifications to the hyperdrive he's dreamed up with the R&D boys. He tells me they should allow us to run XL5's motors at full power for longer. It should give us the edge on XL7.'

'I'll order Jock to get your ship on the launch rails and ready for blast off as soon as possible,' said Zero.

Six hours later Fireball XL5 had been winched up from the vast underground hangars beneath Space City and was now resting on a launch trolley ready for blast-away.

Steve was in the Main Control Cabin with Robert the Robot, his tireless mechanical co-pilot, by his side. Venus was at her launch station in the ship's Navigation Bay assisting Professor Matthew Matic.

'T-minus 1 minute and counting,' came Lieutenant Ninety's voice over the ship's radio.

'Steve, my drive mods are still untested,' said Mat nervously over the great ship's intercom. 'The motors could over-heat and develop a chain reaction - like they did when we broke the hyperlight barrier. Or we could just plain blow-up.'

'Mat, it's the only chance we have of catching XL7 before she reaches Zanadu,' said Steve calmly.

The countdown reached zero and the launch trolley propelled the WSP's flagship along the launch rails until she leapt into space under her own power.

'Steve,' came Mat's voice again, resigned now to their mission, 'steer course 173 zero-black. At full power that should get us to Zanadu within six days - if we don't explode first.'

'Okay, Mat - you've made your point,' said Steve as he entered the course-code into the helm and engaged the hyperdrive. 'Maintain maximum speed and course, Robert,' instructed Steve as he rose to leave the control cabin, 'and inform me the moment XL7 comes within interceptor range.'

'Maintain maximum speed and course, maintain maximum speed and course,' repeated the transparent robot in his electronic monotone.

Steve headed for the lounge to discuss tactics with Venus and Mat - and grab a much-needed coffee.

## Chapter 4

Steve sat in Fireball's lounge sipping his coffee and waiting for the others to join him.

He hoped his faith in Mat's engineering skills did not let them down. The motors would get dangerously hot running at full power for six days - but if they could stop XL7 reaching Zanadu maybe, just maybe, the influence that had taken over his friend could be broken and Jim's mind restored. Steve felt there was a lot more at stake than any of their lives though - a hell of a lot more.

Mat and Venus entered the lounge... followed by Zoonie the lazoan. 'Venus, you promised to leave Zoonie on Earth,' said Steve with a look of exasperation at the ship's mascot. 'You know what effect Zanadu is liable to have on him.'

'I'm sorry Steve,' said Venus. 'I'd left him with Mrs. Zero. I don't know how he got on board.'

'Well, it's too late to do anything about it now,' said Mat. 'At least he'll warn us of any psychic dangers before they're strong enough to affect us - I hope.'

'He could go wild,' added Steve. 'You'd better lock him up once we near Zanadu, Venus - unless we catch Jim first.'

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Five days passed by without incident. Fireball XL5's hyperdrive propelled her through the contracted dimension of the universe known as hyperspace at over half the speed of light - a velocity equivalent to 500 times light-speed when related to normal space. Mat's modifications improved the output of the nuclear reactor by 5% - but the motors could not take this punishment much longer without developing a dangerous chain reaction.

'XL7 within interceptor range, XL7 within interceptor range,' came Robert's electronic voice over XL5's intercom.

Steve raced for the Control Cabin and within two minutes was seated beside his co-pilot. 'Mat, I'm going to try to reason with Jim before we open fire,' advised Steve over the intercom.

'You are wasting your breath, Steve,' called Venus from the laboratory. 'It's not Jim Ireland that we are dealing with.'

'I've got to try,' said Steve, opening a hailing frequency on the ship's neutroni radio.

'Jim, this is Steve Zodiac in Fireball XL5. Cut your motors and heave to. You must not land on Zanadu.'

No answer.

'I will use force if I have to, Jim. Cut your motors or we will open fire with interceptor missiles.'

'We can help you, Jim. Fight whatever is controlling you - fight it.'

'He cannot 'fight it' - and neither will you if you try to stop Major Ireland returning me, the last of the Kudos Emperors, to my ancient home,' boomed a sinister voice over Fireball's radio receiver.

'Robert - prepare interceptor missiles,' instructed Steve as the full impact of the message sank home.

Suddenly a tremendous explosion rocked XL5 and she fell out of hyperspace with a sickening wrench that knocked her human crew unconscious...

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Half an hour later Steve and his crew slowly regained consciousness and began to assess the damage. Venus administered pain-killers to relieve their aching heads.

Two hours' later they all sat in the lounge comparing notes.

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Fireball's over-stretched motors had exploded as Mat had feared - luckily the blast had been contained by the engine room bulkhead, otherwise the whole ship would have been destroyed.

XL5 hung in free float only 3 hours at maximum speed from the Zanadu system but with little hope of continuing her journey without major repair work.

'We'll leave the Main Body and continue in Fireball Junior,' decided Steve. 'There's no way we'll stop Kudos using Jim to return to Zanadu now, but we've got to do something. Kudos must be destroyed before he can re-establish himself there... even if it means killing Jim to do it.'

'Jim's as good as dead already,' reminded Venus bleakly.



## Chapter 5

Leaving Robert to safeguard XL5, Fireball Junior was soon on its way. Steve and Mat sat at the controls whilst Venus did her best to calm Zoonie in the rest room.

The Lazoon was becoming more and more agitated as they neared the source of his unease - Zanadu! XL5 's mascot was experiencing the terrible racial memories he shared with all his kind - of the time when lazoonns there were driven wild by the evil emanating from the Dome of the Kudos Emperors. The 'memories' were growing more and more vivid in his semi-telepathic mind. Zoonie could not be consoled as he remembered the death agonies of these wild and dangerous lazoonns as they attacked the Dome and its wicked inhabitants - until only one Kudos creature had been left alive. The last of the Zanadus had sworn revenge on all lazoonns in the universe and would not rest until he had destroyed every last one.

Venus was reminded how a year ago her pet had almost died of the lazoon disease milomytosis after eating Martian Delight infected by Kudos' 'conditioned messenger' - Jim Ireland. They had saved Zoonie with water from the Frozen Fountain of Life situated beneath the Dome itself. Ironically this was an act which appeared to have ended Kudos' life.

Venus now realised that only Kudos' body had died that day beneath his shattered Dome. The alien's mind had somehow lived on within Major Ireland's brain - getting stronger and more able to control its host body until it had decided to take over and return home.

'I, Kudos, the last of the Kudos Emperors, reaffirm my vow to destroy all lazoonns in the universe. My ancient ancestors will be avenged.'

Everyone aboard Fireball Junior heard the words - whether over the little ship's radio or directly in their minds no-one was quite sure.

Zoonie had to be sedated after that.

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It took twelve hours to reach Zanadu in Fireball Junior as her hyperdrive was limited and intended for emergency use only. Steve fired the retros and guided her down through the planet's thin atmosphere, heading for the ruins of the Dome.

They could see XL7 sitting beside the Dome as Fireball Junior came in to land near the entrance to the underground catacombs discovered on their previous visit.

Zanadu was a cold planet - a world of frozen beauty where unknown dangers lay waiting for the unwary. There was no sign of life as Steve, Venus and Mat lifted out of Junior on their jetmobiles.

'Are you sure Zoonie is okay in the rest room, Venus?' asked Steve as they headed for the catacombs.

'Yes, Steve - the sedative should keep him asleep for eight hours.'

'That should give us time to grab Jim and get out of here,' said Steve.

'I may not be able to free your friend from Kudos' control, Steve - you realise that,' said Venus quietly.

'We must be on guard all the time we're in Jim's presence, Steve,' added Mat. 'We don't know how powerful Kudos is yet - he may be able to take over our minds too.'

'Now there's a pleasant thought,' muttered Steve as they entered the catacombs that led beneath the ruined Dome - logically they would find Kudos lurking there.

Steve found it hard to think of this old friend as 'Kudos', but realized he had to now, to be effective against the alien.



## Chapter 6

The catacombs were cold - a thick frost coated the walls and floor. They passed many alcoves in which the mummified remains of Kudos' ancient ancestors stood wrapped in rotting bandages. It was an eerie home of the dead that made them feel like desecrators. The sooner they were out of here the better.

'This would be a great place to make one of those old horror movies,' said Mat.

'Oh, hush Professor - please,' said Venus, looking around her uncomfortably.

'They're all dead, Venus - they can't harm anyone,' said Steve.

'So's Jim Ireland,' said Venus quietly.

The three World Space Patrol officers reached the chamber of the Frozen Fountain of Life. Steve could see that the icicle he had broken from it to save Zoonie's life had somehow regenerated. The Fountain was whole again - and Jim Ireland stood beside it, dressed in the robes of Kudos, waiting for them. The thought that the robes had undoubtedly been taken from Kudos' original dead body made Venus shiver.

'Jim - you must fight Kudos,' said Steve as they came to a halt near the Fountain. 'You're Jim Ireland, not Kudos.'

'You are wasting your time, Zodiac,' said 'Kudos'. 'Jim Ireland is dead. I, Kudos, now claim his body as my own. You are going to help me carry out my vow to destroy all Lazoons in the universe. My ancient ancestors will be avenged.'

'We intend to take you back to Earth, Jim,' said Steve. 'Doctor Venus can help you. It's Kudos that's dead, not you!

'I'm your friend, Jim. You taught me everything you knew back in '51 - your pioneering flights encouraged me to become an astronaut in the first place.'

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'It's no good, Zodiac,' said Kudos. 'You cannot reach Ireland now... And Doctor Venus has already helped me far more than she can know.'

Another cold shiver ran up the space doctor's spine as Kudos looked at her through Jim Ireland's eyes - eyes that glowed like the fires of hell.

'What does he mean, Steve?' asked Venus as she sat transfixed in the glare of those eyes.

'I dunno, Venus, but I intend to find out - now.'

'Not so fast, Zodiac - or your lovely doctor dies!' cried Kudos.

Venus screamed in pain. 'Make him stop, Steve, please make him stop!' gasped the doctor; her head felt as if it was about to explode.

'Stay where you are Earthmen - or I will increase the pressure on her brain until she'll never feel pain again.'

Anger forced a snarl from Steve: 'If you don't stop that -'

'Calm down, Steve,' hissed Mat. 'We can't help Venus by threatening Kudos - he'll kill her.'

Kudos suddenly released Venus from his power and she toppled, semi-conscious, from her jetmobile. Steve leapt from his machine and ran to her aid; he slowly helped her to her feet.

'I have the power to kill every one of you where you stand, now that I have drunk from the Frozen Fountain of Life once again,' said Kudos, his eyes glowing dangerously. 'I learnt many things once I grew strong enough to control the body of Jim Ireland. While Doctor Venus carried out her medical checks on my new body at Space City I was able to enter her subconscious mind undetected.'

Venus felt the cold hand of fear grip her stomach as she realised her mind had been invaded.

'It was simple to instruct Venus to bring her lazoon to Zanadu,' continued Kudos. 'The hated creature will learn that it cannot escape the revenge of Kudos a second time. I will now amplify the doctor's thoughts so that she wakes the lazoon. The hated creature will follow her thoughts to its doom.'

'He would never come within a mile of this evil place,' gasped Venus.

'Oh, but it would. Once it is close enough the lazoon's semi-telepathic mind will be drawn by my psychic energy, powerless to resist, like a moth to a flame!'

'No!' cried Venus. 'You can't make me betray Zoonie.'

'You have not only betrayed the lazoon, Doctor Venus, 'said Kudos, 'you have also betrayed Colevio, the original home-planet of all lazoons. When my mind entered yours I discovered that the humanoids who now inhabit Colevio seeded the universe with lazoons to speed the creatures' extinction on Colevio and allow their race to migrate to that planet. The humanoids were responsible for bringing the hated lazoons to Zanadu and destroying the Kudos Empire. I will have my revenge on the new inhabitants of Colevio.

'You, Steve Zodiac, will become my new conditioned messenger - but this time it will not be the milomytosis virus you carry, but planatomic missiles. You will take XL 7 to Colevio and destroy the accursed planet. You will blast it out of existence!

'The Colevians will never expect an attack from a ship of the World Space Patrol. Your act of aggression will be the beginning of the end for the United Planets Organisation. Each member will accuse the Earth of treachery and by manipulating the minds of key leaders I will cause a space war

that will destroy every planet where lazoons can be found. My ancient ancestors will finally be avenged!'

## Chapter 7

'You can't destroy a planet in your insane lust for revenge,' pleaded Mat. 'From what you've said you must realise that the lazoons on Zanadu were infected by your people's evil. They brought about their own downfall.'

'That is a lie!' exploded Kudos, and for one terrible second Mat thought he'd pushed the alien too far. But with a visible effort Kudos controlled his anger. He turned to Steve. 'Now, Zodiac...'

'I won't submit to your brainwashing,' said Steve grimly.

'You forget the life of the doctor is in my hands...' said Kudos coldly, 'and if her life is not inducement enough I will make you enter my Conditioning Chamber by directly controlling your mind as I did with Major Ireland before you.'

'No!' roared Steve, jumping back onto his jetmobile and firing the vehicle's coma cannon at the alien.

The rays sparked around him - enough energy to stun an elephant, but Kudos remained standing.

'Help me, Mat,' shouted Steve.

Mat tried to bring his jetmobile's weapon into play but he felt the alien enter his mind. Mat fired the coma cannon - but not at Kudos. The rays struck Steve Zodiac and he fell from his jetmobile, instantly unconscious.

'Professor Matic and Doctor Venus, you will carry Zodiac to the long term Conditioning Chamber,' commanded Kudos. 'Colevio will be reduced to space dust whether your Colonel likes it or not.'

Over an hour passed during which Mat and Venus watched in horrified fascination as the alien fastened Steve into a device that resembled an iron- maiden and then commenced a hypnotic ritual that would put the astronaut firmly in his power.

The chamber rocked with recorded chants as strobe lights flashed around Steve, his mind becoming conditioned to give no resistance to a permanent link with Kudos. 'You are now my slave, Zodiac,' cried the alien exultantly. 'You will carry out my orders. You cannot disobey me.'

Steve Zodiac stepped from the conditioning device and looked around him as if in a daze. 'I obey only Kudos,' he said in a dull monotone.

Mat and Venus could do nothing to help - they couldn't even move unless Kudos willed it.

'While Steve Zodiac carries out my vengeance against Colevio I will decide how best I can use your services,' said Kudos, turning triumphantly to Steve's companions. 'Maybe the good doctor would like to help me create a new Kudos Dynasty - and you, professor, can be my scientific advisor. I'm sure your knowledge of robotics is vastly superior to mine. I envisage an army of unstoppable robots to defend Zanadu until my offspring can rule the universe.'

'I - I'm sterile. I can't have children,' gasped Venus as the meaning of the alien's words began to sink in.

'I see you speak the truth,' thundered Kudos, probing her mind, 'therefore you are of no use to me. Zodiac, I order you to show me your loyalty and kill Doctor Venus - I want you to break her neck, tear open her jugular artery and show me the blood on your hands.'

Steve appeared confused as he looked at Venus and then at his hands.

'Do it, Zodiac - you cannot resist my conditioning. Do it!'

'No, Steve, please! No! Steve, nooo!' Venus was sobbing.

'Steve! It's Venus - you can't kill her!' shouted Mat.

'I - I - must kill Doctor Venus,' said Steve emotionlessly as he walked towards her. 'I have no will of my own.'

Venus was still rooted to the spot by Kudos direct influence - she could not move her legs at all. Was this the end? To be cruelly murdered by her commanding officer, by Steve, a man she had come to admire and even - dare she admit it to herself - love.

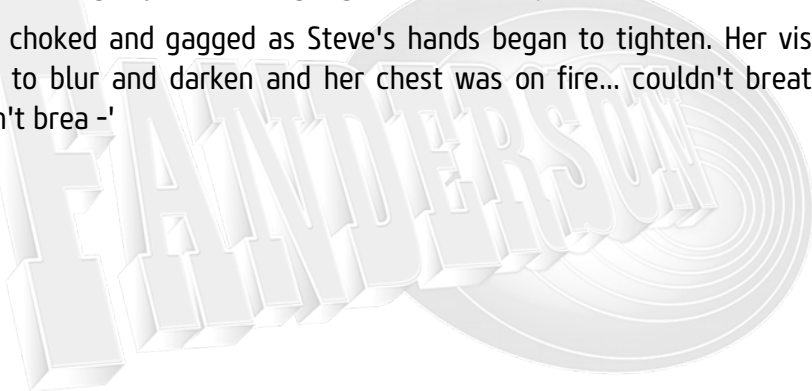
Steve's eyes were lifeless as he approached Venus - his hands came up to encircle her neck.

'Squeeze the life out of her, Zodiac! I want to see blood on your hands!'

'You evil, callous bastard, Kudos,' screamed Mat, helpless to intervene.

'You will watch the death of the doctor in the knowledge that I could order Zodiac to kill you just as easily if you do not co-operate.'

Venus choked and gagged as Steve's hands began to tighten. Her vision began to blur and darken and her chest was on fire... couldn't breathe, couldn't brea -'



## Chapter 8

Suddenly a snarling, roaring sound was heard. Zoonie the Lazoon ran into the chamber - but this was a different Zoonie to XL5's lethargic mascot. His eyes were wild - his tail was held high as he leapt onto the robed figure of Kudos and started to rip at the alien's throat with his teeth while clinging onto him with suckered fingers and toes. 'Zodiac - help me...' gasped 'Kudos'.

Zoonie wrapped his long tail around Kudos' neck and began to tighten...

Venus felt Steve's grip on her throat slacken as she gratefully lost consciousness.

Mat sensed Kudos control over his movements vanish as he saw Steve move sluggishly to aid the alien. 'No, Steve, no!' Mat leapt at XL5's commander in an attempt to hold him - but the younger man was too strong for the professor. Mat managed to grab Steve's coma ray gun as he went down - and he fired at his skipper.

Steve could feel the coma rays envelope him - but the mental link with Kudos kept him conscious.

'Zodiac - help me get this - this lazoon off me,' gasped Kudos, his stolen face and hands now a bloody mess.

Zoonie grew wilder and stronger by the second - a rabid frothing appearing at his mouth.

Steve felt Kudos' control begin to weaken. He must save his master from... from... Zoonie? Kudos - his master?

What was happening?

'Zodiac - save me...' came Kudos weak cry as Zoonie proceeded to rain blow after blow down onto the alien's head. The lazoon seemed larger, wilder, as if he was absorbing Kudos' life-force like a sponge. It was almost over...

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Mat ran to Steve again and managed to pull his bewildered friend and commander away from the terrible scene as Zoonie gave one final blow and ended Kudos' life for a second time.

Zoonie glared around him as he stood atop the bloody corpse of Kudos, the evil enemy of all lazoon -

No, damn' it; this was the lifeless body of Steve's friend, Jim Ireland, now that the alien's influence had left it.

'Now, now - stay back, Zoonie,' said Mat, nervously pointing the coma gun at the victorious lazoon.

'What's been going on, Mat?' queried Steve, looking at the remains of his old friend. 'I can remember firing at Kudos and then... nothing, until now.'

'Kudos brainwashed you,' said Mat. 'He almost made you kill Venus. Zoonie ran in and attacked him at the last moment, thank goodness.'

'He's gone wild, Steve - absolutely crazy.'

Steve ran over to Venus and could see the bruising on her neck as she started to come round. 'Venus - are you okay? Venus...'

'Keep away from me... Keep away...'

'It's okay, Venus, it's okay,' said Steve. 'Kudos is gone - Zoonie attacked him. The lazoon saved your life - all our lives.'

'Not to mention Colevio,' added Mat, 'and the whole United Plan -'

Suddenly Zoonie leapt at Venus, a wild, rabid look in his eyes.

Mat fired his coma gun just in time. The lazoon screamed in rage and tried to fight off the effect of the rays but Mat continued firing until Zoonie collapsed at the doctor's feet...



## Epilogue

'We've got to leave him here. There's no other way, said Steve. 'He's been infected by Kudos 'evil just as the original lazoons that came to Zanadu were. He's too wild and dangerous now to keep as a pet.'

'Oh, Zoonie, poor Zoonie,' sobbed Venus as she knelt down beside her unconscious pet and stroked his furry head.

'There's plenty of food on the planet's surface, Venus, 'said Mat softly. 'He'll be much happier in the wild.'

Venus steeled herself and stood up beside Steve who put his arm around her shoulder. He felt her flinch and quickly moved away. Would things ever be the same again between them? 'I'm sorry, Venus... I'm sorry,' said Steve quietly, not able to take his eyes from the dark bruising around her neck.

They found their way back to the Frozen Fountain of Life and reclaimed the jetmobiles - Steve had sadly carried Jim Ireland's corpse over his shoulder while Mat had helped Venus carry the comatose Zoonie.

They left Zoonie in the frozen wilds that surrounded the shattered Dome and took off in Fireball XL7. Apart from returning with Robert, who would then pilot Fireball Junior back to XL5, and wait for the repair gang from Earth, Steve and his crew hoped that they would never have to set foot on Zanadu again.

Zanadu!

So beautiful - but oh, so evil...

**The End**