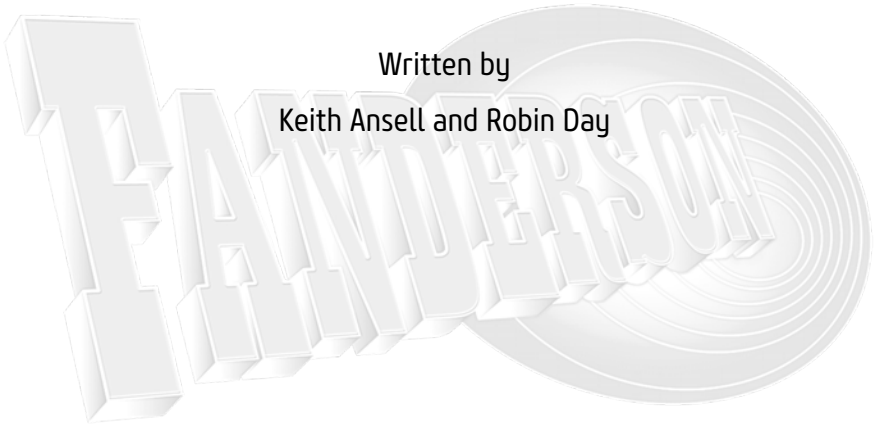


# I, HIMBER

A Fireball XL5 Story

Written by

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## Chapter 1

Professor Matthew Matic sat up wearily in his makeshift bed in the XL Projects Workshop at Space City. Matt couldn't sleep. He had been working on improvements for Robert since returning to Earth three days ago and now needed a good night's sleep - but his mind would not let him rest. His aim was to find some way of avoiding the internal conflicts that caused Robert to blow his top from time to time.

Matt sighed, he'd just have to take one of those sleeping pills Venus had prescribed for him.

"There," he said to himself after taking the medication. "Now for a good night's sleep."

He lay back in his bed once more and closed his weary eyes.

The telephone rang, far too loudly for Matt's liking.

Matt groped for the phone beside his bed.

"Can't a fella get any beauty sleep around here?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you Professor Matic" said Lieutenant Ninety from the Control Tower. "But I have an off-planet call for you over the neutroni radio - it sounds urgent"

"Tell 'em to call in the morning." Matt responded gruffly.

"But it's already ten in the morning. Professor."

Matt glanced at the clock on the wall. "Oh, er, yeah. Who's making the call?"

"It's a Doctor Adams. He's the director of a Rehabilitation Facility in Sector 16."

"A re-what?"

“A mental hospital sir.”

Matt paused, trying to collect his thoughts. “Lieutenant, if this is a joke.”

“No joke sir. I have Doctor Adams on hold, shall I put him through?”

“Okay Ninety, put him on.”

“Professor Matic?” came an unfamiliar voice over the phone.

Matt put his glasses on, peered into a wall mirror and ran a hand through his dishevelled iron grey hair, “Yeah...that’s me. What can I do for you Doctor Adams?”

“I’m sorry if I disturbed your work Professor but one of my patients keeps insisting I ask you to visit him. I’m afraid he’s not allowed to leave the facility. Since the man may only have a few months left to live we felt we should contact you. I believe you know the patient. His name is Professor Al Himer...”

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“But Steve...” Venus protested, “I really think that we should all go.”

Venus, Matt and Commander Zero were sitting in Steve Zodiac’s spacious apartment in the accommodation ring of the Space City Control Tower. Steve was sipping his coffee thoughtfully as he stared out of his lounge window. He was thinking back to two years earlier, when he and the crew of Fireball XL5 had confronted the mad Professor on Planet 82 - a planet Himer had renamed Robotvia.

He returned to the small group and placed his cup on the table.

“Okay Venus. If you want to go and visit Professor Himer with Matt, that’s up to you. Me - I’m keeping well away from that guy.”

Venus looked up earnestly, "I know how you feel Steve. But from a medical point of view, Professor Himber needs help from all three of us."

"Yeah." Matt agreed, "It seems he wants to bury the hatchet and make amends for what he did. And after all, he's still the leading expert in robotics."

Commander Zero glanced at Matt and then back to Steve, "And that Steve, is why I think you ought to go. Just shake Himber's hand, that's all it'll take. He's a top scientist - tootie or not. It wouldn't look good if he was snubbed by the WSP 's most publicised hero when he tried his best to apologise for his misdeeds."

"Well if you put it like that Commander..."

Zero put up his hands. "It's not an order Steve. Think it over. You've got quite a reputation for helping anyone in need - and Al Himber is in need."

Steve smiled. "Okay, okay. I give in. Set a date and I'll tag along."

"Thanks Steve. Ninety will have XL5 ready for launch tomorrow morning." Zero told him as he got to his feet.

## Chapter 2

Two days later Fireball XL5 arrived at QX7, otherwise known as the Sector 16 Rehabilitation Facility. From a distance QX7 looked much like any other medium sized asteroid. As the ship drew closer the crew could make out a few domes and fuel storage tanks dotted here and there on the rocky surface.

Venus was standing in the control cabin for the final approach.

She leaned on the back of Steve's chair.

"Not much to look at is it" said Venus "But inside it's like a small town, with parks and trees."

Steve nodded, "Sounds swell Venus, but I wouldn't want to live there..." He switched on the neutroni radio. "Fireball XL5 to space facility QX7. Request permission to come along side and disembark."

The facility responded warmly, "Welcome Fireball XL5. Please maintain holding position at three-one-one zero green. We'll send a cab right away."

"Thank you QX7. Will stand-by at position three-one-one zero-green." Steve turned to his robot co-pilot sitting beside him. "Okay Robert, Maintain position in free-float."

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An automatic space-cab ferried Steve, Venus and Matt across to the asteroid. It only took minutes for it to reach one of the numerous surface domes. As the craft approached the dome split open into segments and allowed the small vehicle to enter.

"This sure is state-of-the-art." Matt exclaimed as they climbed out of the space-cab.

“Yes....” Venus said as she looked around her. It was like standing in a park on Earth or Mars. Green grass, trees....”It’s like a summer’s day - but where does the light come from?”

“The, er, luminosity,” Matt told her, “is produced by fields of plasma, and magnetic fields spread the light uniformly producing that blue sky effect.”

“Looks like we’re being met...” Steve said pointing towards a white coated figure hurrying towards them.

“Welcome all of you. I’m Doctor Adams.” the man announced as he reached them, shaking each of the visitors by the hand enthusiastically. “Thank you for coming Professor Matic and for bringing your colleagues. Colonel Zodiac and Doctor Venus I presume? Professor Himber would like to apologise to all three of you for his misguided actions two years ago and make peace with his soul before it is too late.”

The doctor escorted his guests to a long low building that served as a reception area.

“What is Professor Himber’s mental condition now?” asked Steve, still wary of having anything to do with the man - no matter what that did to his hero’s image.

Insanity was one of the few things in this universe that actually frightened him.

Doctor Adams pursed his lips, “Well Colonel, he’s not ‘dangerous’ if that’s what you mean. He’s calm, introspective but appears to be filled with remorse.”

Doctor Adams nodded to a burly looking male nurse who opened a door with an electronic key. “This way please.”

“How long has the patient been like this Doctor?” Venus asked.

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“About a couple of months. It’s been a shocking change I can tell you. Initially Professor Himber was responding well to treatment, full of optimism..” Doctor Adams pointed to a window in the corridor. “That’s his laboratory over there. We had it equipped for him as a form of therapy.”

“You gave Himber a laboratory?” said Steve not quite believing what he had just heard.

“Yes Colonel. But there’s no need to be alarmed. I assure you he has no facilities for making robots. It’s all just schoolboy type science projects.”

“You’re a scientist?” Matt asked, a little concerned.

“My field is psychiatry Professor, but I do have all of the patients requests for apparatus checked out by experts and his projects are overseen.”

“I wonder why he suddenly went into depression?” Venus said thoughtfully.

“My prognosis Doctor, is that as Himber’s sanity returned he became more fully aware of his ‘crimes’.”

“You don’t seem to think they were crimes Doctor Adams....” said Steve.

“I believe that in a strictly ethical sense they were not crimes Colonel, just examples of extreme mental disorder. He harmed no-one after all.”

Steve felt Venus squeezing his arm and he decided not to argue.

“Okay Doctor Adams. Can we just go and get this over with and we’ll be on our way.”

“Of course Colonel. But please, once you have spoken with our patient, I would like to extend our hospitality - as a gesture of appreciation.”

“That is very kind of you Doctor Adams,” smiled Venus.

“Yeah, that’s mighty nice of you,” said Matt.

“Okay...let’s see Himber and get it over with.” Steve insisted.

"If you'd all like to go inside then. I'll remain here. Don't worry, Al Hember is under constant surveillance and he won't give you any trouble."

Professor Hember smiled broadly as he greeted his visitors. "Welcome Colonel Zodiac, Doctor Venus and Professor Matic. It's so good of you to drop by."

Steve's temper was not improving.

"I wish to apologise to all of you. I am sorry for what happened on Robotvia - er, I mean Planet 82. I was not well I'm afraid. Will you please forgive me."

"Of course Professor Hember." Steve said shaking Hember's hand. "We just want you to get well."

"That's right Professor Hember," said Venus. "We know you were under a tremendous strain with your work. You just need rest."

"Thank you my dear. I am so pleased that you understand," said Hember. "Ah Professor Matic. Would you do me the honour of speaking with me on a scientific matter."

"Of course Professor Hember." Matt agreed.

"I think we should leave the two professors to talk shop for a while, Venus" said Steve. "Let's go and sample a little of Doctor Adam's hospitality"

"Okay Steve. We'll see you later Matt. Au revoir, Professor Hember."

Steve and Venus rejoined Doctor Adams who sat waiting for them out in the hospital corridor.

"Well what did you think of our mad genius, Venus?" asked Steve,

"He seemed a little too calm for my liking."

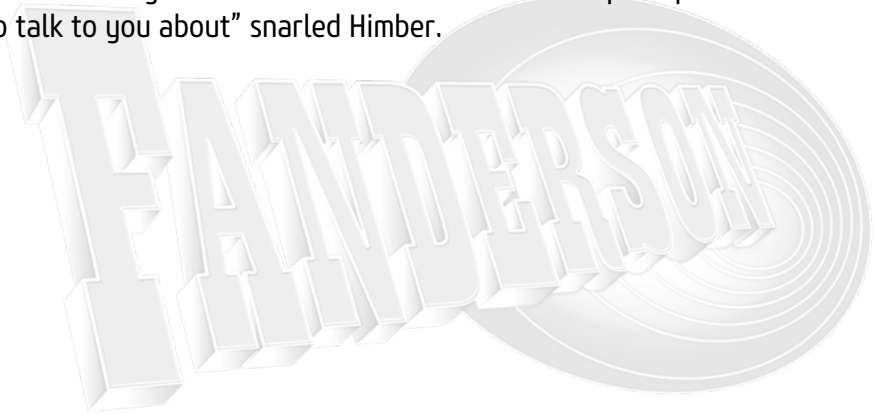


Back in the room they had just left Humber's mood suddenly darkened as he scowled at Matt.

"You always thought your work in robotics was superior to mine. How can you compare that... that transparent prototype of yours to one of my beautiful robots? Have you found a way to resolve the conflicts in the positronic brain circuits yet? Of course you haven't. Only someone with my intellect can do that"

"N-now calm down Professor Humber," said Matt, worried at the man's sudden mood swing. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I'm not sure you would even understand the basic principles of what I want to talk to you about" snarled Humber.



### Chapter 3

“This way.” Doctor Adams said eagerly as he ushered Steve and Venus back outside. He pointed with a neatly rolled umbrella, “We’ll cut through the park.”

They made their way along a winding path between pleasant lawns and flower beds.

“It’s all so quiet.” Venus said as she looked around the park. “Are there birds here?”

“Oh I’m afraid not. Regulations I’m afraid - hygiene and all that. The vegetation is quite real though, mostly specimens brought in from Earth.”

“Why the umbrella Doctor Adams?” Steve wanted to know.

“Oh, that’s in case I have to walk on the grass. I probably won’t have to but it’s as well to be prepared, just in case.”

Steve and Venus exchanged a glance.

“In case you have to walk on the grass?” Venus asked.

“Yes, it’s Thursday you see. It always rains on Thursdays.” He looked at his watch, “Actually, any time now.” Adams walked briskly on. “We’ll soon be at the entrance to the administration block.”

Steve glanced around, “I don’t see any buildings.”

“No, you won’t. We’re underground. It makes more sense to build downwards here rather than upwards. Ah, here we are.”

Doctor Adams pointed to a large hole in the ground, about ten feet in diameter.

“But it’s just a hole in the ground.” Venus said.

“Yes, that’s right.” Adams agreed. “The shaft goes right down to the centre of the asteroid - There are twenty levels. Don’t worry, it’s quite safe - low gravity in the shaft you see.”

Doctor Adams stepped over the edge of the shaft and began to slowly move downward.

Steve took Venus’ hand “Okay, lets go” he said, as they both walked towards the centre of the gaping hole.

“As you can see. “Doctor Adams smiled up at them from several feet below, “The descent is quite smooth and safe.”

They fell downwards, though there was little sensation of movement. Instead the walls of the shaft seemed to be rising past them. Large signs identified each level as they passed by.

“When you reach the level you want, you just grab a hold of the railing and step onto the balcony.” Adams demonstrated, by deftly hooking the handle of his umbrella onto the railings at level four. He paused for a moment before continuing his descent. This allowed his fellow travellers to catch up, which made conversation easier.

Venus began to wonder to herself whether cats ate bats - or indeed if bats ate cats. “This is so surreal Doctor Adams...” she exclaimed.

“Yes indeed it is.” Doctor Adams smiled, “If you are going to spend your life inside a giant boulder, one may as well be comfortable.”

“Which level are we, er, falling to Doctor Adams?” Steve asked, He could still see a small patch of daylight far above him and he couldn’t make out any ‘ground’ below.

“Level 20.” Adams told him. “I’m right in the centre of things. They call me the lowest of the low...”

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“Please let me show you something I have been working on while resident at this... this establishment” said Humber leading Matt over to a nearby workbench and handing him what appeared to be a standard electrovogul computer processing chip. “This chip will theoretically revolutionise the positronic brain. It will improve a robot's response time tenfold and resolve all of its internal conflicts - but you wouldn't understand its functions even if I explained them to you”

“But...but that's incredible Humber” spluttered Matt, too taken aback to remain offended.

“I need you to test it for me on your robot” said Humber.

Matt just stared at the chip as if he hadn't heard Humber.

“Please Professor Matic - I'm a dying man. I must know if I have been successful before I die. Please...”

Matt turned the chip over in his hands, almost reverently.

“You solved the decision making processes?”

“It was a relatively simple problem in the end. A matter of adjusting the positronic cerebral cortex - effectively splitting it into two parts.”

“You mean like the human brain?”

“Yes, yes. It performs the functions of the conscious and subconscious mind, allowing far faster background processing.”

“Incredible!” Matt muttered again, handing the device back to Humber.

“You won't test it? I know how much you need this device.”

“I, ah, I'll have to discuss it with Colonel Zodiac first.”

“Pah! Colonel Zodiac. What does he know of robotics. I am asking you a favour Professor - one scientist to another. Take the device and install it in Robert.”

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Steve and Venus were ushered into Doctor Adams' office.

"Please take a seat, I'm sorry if things seem a little crowded."

"Oh there's plenty of room." Venus smiled as she took a seat beside the large desk.

Steve sat next to Venus, casually glancing around the office. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books of all sizes. The desk itself was covered in untidy stacks of documents and filing trays.

Doctor Adams sat down opposite his guests and pushed some of the clutter to one side. "Will you take tea?"

He picked up his telephone and called for three cups of tea with milk and sugar to be brought to his office before Steve and Venus had time to accept or refuse his offer.

"How do you cope with the isolation of patrol duty, Colonel?" asked Adams as soon as he put the telephone down.

"There is always plenty to keep myself and my crew busy, Doctor - even on a quiet patrol" said Steve momentarily taken off guard.

He hated tea but decided to accept a cup so as not to prolong the formalities any longer than was necessary.

He wanted to get back to Fireball and away from this crazy place.

"Don't you get irritated with one another's bad habits?"

"Oh, no, Doctor Adams" responded Venus, quickly glancing at Steve. "All Fireball crews are chosen for their compatibility...as I'm sure you are aware"

“Of course, of course,” said Adams as if he wasn’t really interested in her answer. “Crackers? Anyone?” He pushed an opened packet of dry cream crackers towards his guests that he had just spotted on the corner of his desk.

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Matt walked away from Himber’s laboratory and down the corridor that led back to the reception area. Himber’s new device was stored safely away in the cardboard box he was carrying.

Had he really agreed to test it in Robert?

Talking to Himber had drained Matt - he felt mentally exhausted but excited at the same time.

If the chip actually solved the conflicts in the positronic brain then Himber’s name would go down in history. Robots would be one step closer to sentience...

Matt left the Reception Building and decided to go back to Fireball - now that he had given his word to Himber that he would test the chip he wanted to get on with it.

He reckoned Steve and Venus would be tucking into a tasty buffet by now anyway so that should give him a few hours.

Matt could see the Space Cab Terminal on the edge of the parkland surrounding the Hospital Reception Building. He decided to take a shortcut to it and stepped off the pathway onto the grass...

Matt was half way to the space cabs when the ‘sky’ began to darken. He looked up worriedly. As he watched a mist seemed to form high up in the hollowed asteroid. He heard the rain just before it hit him. Within seconds he was absolutely drenched. Hurrying on he clutched the box containing the delicate positronic chip close to his side.

As he reached the terminal building he could see a security guard standing outside watching him. He seemed to totally disregard the torrential rain. As Matt reached the man he was suddenly grabbed and pulled off the grass and onto the pathway. The rain seemed to stop abruptly, but then Matt realized that it was only raining on the grass - not on the path.

“What have we here?” the guard asked as he studied the water saturated scientist. “Out for a little walk are we?”

“I’m going back to Fireball, taking a space cab.”

The guard smiled kindly, “Oh you want a ride in the big spaceship do you?” He eyed Matt’s cardboard box, “I see you’ve got your Martian Crunchies so you’ll grow up to be a big spaceman.”

“The box contains an important scientific device.” Matt informed the guard, “And I don’t like your tone.”

“Amazing what they give away in breakfast cereal these days.” The guard nodded wisely. He activated his radio, “Got one here to be taken home. He was trying to sneak a ride in that spaceship up there. Can you send somebody to collect him?” The guard paused and spoke to Matt again, “What’s your name spaceman?”

“I’m Professor Matic. This is ridiculous, let me though to the space cabs.”

“He says he’s Professor Matic. Is he the one that loves gardening?” The guard paused again. “Really? Oh, yes of course Doctor Adams.” The guard looked at Matt again. “Er, I’m sorry about that, Professor er Matic. Slight misunderstanding. I’ll take you to a cab.”

Doctor Adams put down his telephone. “Professor Matic is returning to your ship.”

“Oh?” Venus said, looking at her plate of cream crackers. “He doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

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Less than a quarter of an hour later a very wet and bedraggled Matthew Matic was back aboard Fireball XL5 still clutching his soggy cardboard box. He made his way quickly to his workshop leaving a trail of water droplets behind him - he had to find out whether Humber's chip had been damaged in the down pour.

Why had Humber given him something so precious in a cardboard box? What would he tell Humber if the device had been damaged in the rain?

Why was he so worried about Humber anyway. The man had no hold over him - or did he?

He must have been mad to agree to test this positronic chip.

Matt ordered Robert over the intercom to leave the control cabin and make his way back to the workshop.

The Professor grabbed a handful of paper towels from a nearby dispenser and started to dry his hands and face while he waited for the robot.

He would have to get out of this wet uniform soon otherwise he would catch a chill - but he had to connect up the chip first and make sure it was undamaged.

Robert arrived and was soon lying deactivated on his back on a workbench.

Matt opened an access panel in the robot's transparent chest and slowly inserted Humber's device. He now connected it to a universal port located there and reactivated Robert.

Steve would think he was mad endangering Fireball's co-pilot without first carrying out detailed tests on the chip - but he just had to know whether it had been damaged in the rain.

"Stand up, Robert" ordered Matt

The robot just lay on the workbench unmoving.



“Stand up, Robert” ordered Matt again, a worried look now beginning to cloud his face

He could see Humber’s chip was active so why didn’t Robert respond?

Reluctantly Matt removed Humber’s device, “Now Robert, stand up.”

The robot dutifully got to it’s feet and stood facing the Professor.

“Guess there’s no harm done to Robert, “Matt mused, “Wonder if I can fix the problem with the device?”

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Steve and Venus were finishing their second cup of tea.

“Well now. “Doctor Adams was saying, “How would you like me to show you around the rest of this facility?”

Venus cast a sideways glance at Steve, who didn’t look terribly enthusiastic about the Doctor’s proposal.

“Doctor Adams, “she said carefully, “I would love to see more of your excellent hospital but we’re a little tired from our journey. Could we see more tomorrow?”

“Oh yes, of course my dear.” Doctor Adams said as he brushed crumbs from his desk. “But please, you must spend the night here, in our guest quarters. It must be very unpleasant having to spend so much time cooped up in that little spaceship of yours.”

Venus looked anxiously at Steve, who didn’t seem to feel inclined to respond to the Doctor’s comments.

“Steve? Would that be okay?”

“Uh? Oh sure Venus.” Steve said making a supreme effort to be diplomatic, “Thank you Doctor Adams. That’s very kind of you.”

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“Steve Zodiac to Fireball XL5.”

Matt turned to the wall intercom, “Hello Steve.”

“Matt, Venus and I are spending the night down here. I guess you’ll be happy staying aboard the ship? If not...”

“No Steve, that’s fine with me. Er... Something I need to talk to you about Steve.”

“Can it wait until morning Matt?”

“Er, yes Steve, it can wait, I guess there’s no hurry.”

“Okay Professor. We’ll check in with you in the morning. Venus says to remind you to take some of those sleeping pills.”

"Er, sure thing... Good night Steve."

Professor Matic had no intention of sleeping. He was working feverishly in Fireball's science laboratory. Sleep was out of the question right now.

His mind was filled with concern about the failed gadget that Himer had given to him. He had to make it work. He could imagine Himer's reaction if he took the device back to him and told him he could not figure out why it didn't work. Clearly Himer already regarded him as an incompetent fool. Perhaps it was something he could simply adjust... Steve would probably insist on returning to Earth in the morning and he might not even get a chance to speak with Himer again. Matt desperately needed a solution to Robert's tendency to fail to operate if confused. If he didn't get that problem fixed he knew his time as an XL5 crew member was drawing to an end. The robot pilot project would be scrapped and he'd be grounded.

Matt stared through the eyepiece of his microscope, tracing the myriads of neutronic pathways in the chip.

"But... this doesn't make any sense..."

Realization slowly dawned on the Professor...

"He must have given me a fake! A darned fake!! It's utterly useless!

He's trying to make me look a fool. I'll show Himber!" Matt muttered angrily,  
"I'll show them all!"



## Chapter 4

Doctor Adams was escorting Steve and Venus down a broad and thickly carpeted corridor, "I'm sure you'll find the accommodation to your liking."

He stopped beside a wooden panelled door. "Allow me." he said opening the door and beckoning for them to follow him in.

"Oh it's wonderful!" Venus exclaimed as she looked around the room. The room was a large one. On one wall was an artificial window which depicted a 3D panorama of a sea shore, complete with rolling waves and seabirds flying in small groups. "You can select from a hundred or so views using these controls." Doctor Adams told them, indicating a small console beside a large four poster bed.

"It's delightful Doctor Adams." Venus said as she examined the draperies around the bed.

"I'm so glad you like it Doctor." Adams said, turning to the door, "Well, I expect you are both very tired from your journey."

"Er, Doctor Adams...", Steve began awkwardly.

"Oh, yes Colonel, your room is identical and just down the corridor."

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Doctor Venus slept peacefully in her comfortable four poster bed, happily dreaming of rabbit holes, mad hatters and tea parties .

In his room, Steve Zodiac wasn't sleeping. He'd woken up suddenly in the middle of the night. He lay in his bed staring up at the elaborate draperies. He could feel something was wrong - badly wrong. He sat up and looked at the wall clock. It was 4 a.m. local time. Throwing back the blankets he got up and retrieved his communicator.

"Zodiac to Fireball XL5, come in Matt."

He sat on the bed and waited. He knew Matt would probably be sound asleep. "Colonel Zodiac to Fireball XL5, Robert respond."

Still no answer. Steve checked his communicator. Fireball XL5 was out of range...

Steve hurriedly began dressing and left his room with his uniform jacket quickly thrown over his shoulder.

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Doctor Venus awoke suddenly, it took a moment for her to remember where she was; a beautiful sunset still hung on the wall where she'd left it, bathing the room in a soft, warm, romantic glow. Had someone just knocked on her bedroom door? She sat up with a start as Steve began knocking on the door again.

"Venus it's me, Steve."

Venus blearily glanced over at the wall clock. It was just after 4 a.m. Throwing off the covers she stifled a yawn as she reluctantly eased herself out of the four poster bed.

The knocking continued, "Venus, let me in, it's urgent!"

Hastily trying to brush her long platinum blonde hair from her eyes, Venus began padding towards the bedroom door.

"Wait!" she told herself, "better put something on..."

Stumbling into the bathroom she grabbed a bathrobe. She took a brief moment to check her appearance in the mirror, as she pulled the rather insubstantial garment on. A bit thin and skimpy, but better than nothing.

There was another loud knock. Venus hurried to unlock the door and then opened it a few inches, "Steve?"

Venus hastily adjusted her bathrobe as Steve pushed into the bedroom, hurriedly fumbling with his belt buckle.

"Whatever is the matter Steve?"

"We've gotta do something Venus, and fast!" Steve announced as he tossed his uniform jacket onto the bed.

"Oh...?" Venus felt her pulse quicken.

Steve pulled out his personal communicator, "Fireball's gone!"

"Oh," Venus responded, "I see..."

"She's out of communicator range." Steve told her.

"But Steve," Venus asked, "why do you want to contact her in the middle of the night?" She sighed as she sat down on the edge of the bed, "If you like, I could give you something to help you sleep..."

"There's something wrong Venus," Steve insisted, "I just know there is!"

There was a knock at the door. Venus and Steve exchanged a questioning glance.

There was another knock, "Doctor Venus?"

Steve snatched up his jacket and began pulling it on as Venus opened the door. Two orderlies were waiting outside.

"Oh, Colonel... Doctor Venus..." said one of the men, "Didn't mean to interrupt.... anything..."

The other orderly smirked as he took in the scene. "You'd better get some clothes on Doctor Venus, Doctor Adams wants to see both of you - immediately."

## Chapter 5

Doctor Adams sat in his office, his face expressionless as Steve and Venus arrived.

“What’s this about Doctor Adams?” Steve demanded,

“What is this about indeed.” Adams said coldly.

One of the orderlies spoke quietly with Doctor Adams. “Yes, yes. Wait outside both of you.”

As the orderlies left Adams glared at his two guests. “There has been a murder in this hospital.”

“A murder?” Venus exclaimed. “That’s terrible.”

“But why...?” Steve started to ask.

“Colonel. An hour ago a robot entered this asteroid and killed Professor Himber. “

“A robot?”

“Yes Colonel, a robot from your spaceship. “

“But that can’t be...” Steve protested.

“Really?” Then watch the screen and tell me it didn’t happen.”

Doctor Adams pressed a button on his desk and a section of wall slid away revealing a large monitor screen.

Steve and Venus watched the screen in disbelief as they saw Robert, wearing his special thruster pack, burst into Himber’s lab brandishing a raygun. Himber was cowering in a corner, behind racks of electronic equipment. Robert advanced, smashing furniture as he came.

Adams turned up the volume. Humber's voice was clearly audible.

"Matic, call off your robot! You are insane. Someone help me!"

An orderly rushed into the laboratory and grabbed Robert's arms. He was flung aside like a rag doll. As another man entered. Robert turned and fired his raygun sending the newcomer crashing to the floor.

"NO!" Humber screamed as one of Robert's clawed hands reached out to grab him. "Stop! Matic stop I beg you! Call off your robot!"

There was a sudden flash and Humber was thrown backwards against the wall. He slid to the floor. Robert turned and left the lab.

"Steve... It's horrible!" Venus exclaimed.

Doctor Adams switched off the monitor.

"Our doctors say that Professor Humber was electrocuted. There was nothing they could do for him." Adams got to his feet and eyed Steve critically, "I know enough about robots to know they don't just get up one morning and decide to murder someone. That robot of yours was obeying orders - he was being controlled. Humber obviously believed it was your Professor Matic. Immediately after the murder your spaceship headed for deep space, and I assume your Professor was at the controls."

"But Matt wouldn't..." Venus began.

"My dear Doctor Venus, "Adams said with a sudden softness to his voice. "I'm afraid the evidence is clear. I did suspect the Colonel - but I'm told you can vouch for him - you were together last night?"

"Er.... Oh yes. That's right." Venus said hesitantly, her face reddening slightly.



"Colonel Zodiac, I want that madman hunted down and arrested for the murder of Professor Al Hember."

"I have to get after Fireball!" said Steve. "Do you have a fast ship here?"

"Alas Colonel, we have no ships whatsoever, just the space-cabs."

"Then I need to contact Space City immediately."

"Impossible. Your robot has somehow disposed of our fifteen foot neutronic transceiver dish, without which we are unable to summon assistance," said Adams. "Oh, there will be a supply ship arriving here tomorrow, but by then Matic will be well away. The murder was very efficiently, er, executed."

"Doctor Adams," Venus said a little shakily, "With your permission, I will have to examine Professor Hember's body and make a medical report..."

Adams nodded, "Of course Doctor Venus." He stood up, "I'll escort you both to the medical wing..."

"Doctor Adams," Steve said thoughtfully. "Would you mind if I watched that recording again while Doctor Venus makes her medical assessment? I'd also like to see a complete inventory of equipment that has been supplied for Professor Hember's use over the last twelve months."

"As you wish Colonel. You may remain here and I'll have someone bring you the inventory."

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It was a while before Venus and Doctor Adams returned from the hospital's mortuary.

Venus gave Steve her verdict, "I can confirm that Professor Hember is dead, Steve. I concur with the doctors here that it looks like the cause of death was electrocution. There are no other signs of injury."

"I just don't get it Venus." Steve said quietly, "That video recording didn't look right. Himber seemed to be playing to the camera as if he was reciting a script to implicate Matt."

"Well he's not acting now Steve," Venus told him flatly, "He's very, very dead."

"Colonel Zodiac," Adams said in a firm but gentle voice, "I understand how you must feel, believe me. But we must look at the facts no matter how unpalatable they may be, rather than simply see what we wish to see. Tell me Colonel," Adams asked in confidential tones, "has your Professor Matic exhibited any, ah, eccentric tendencies of late?"

Before Steve could reply, the telephone on Dr Adams's desk began to ring. Adams quickly picked up the phone, "Yes... are you sure? Very well, remain on full alert."

"It seems your spaceship has returned Colonel." Doctor Adams announced as he replaced the receiver.

Steve grabbed his communicator from his belt, "Zodiac to XL5. Matt, what's going on out there?"

There was a short delay before Matt responded, "Oh, hi Steve. I figured you'd still be in bed."

"Matt? Are you okay? Where have you been?"

"I, er, had a little problem with Robert, nothing to worry about Steve."

"Where's Robert now?" Steve asked urgently.

"He's in the lab, Steve. I had to deactivate him. I'll tell you all about it when you get back."

"What happened Matt?" Steve insisted.

"I made a modification to Robert, but he went kinda tootie and flew Fireball away from the facility without any orders."

"What was the modification Matt?"

"I, er, that is, ahem, Professor Himber wanted me to test a cerebral circuit he'd constructed. It didn't work, so I removed it. Guess I'll have to explain that to Himber."

"Matt, Professor Himber is dead. Robert killed him."

Matt sounded shocked. "Robert killed Himber? But that's impossible."

"Matt, we've seen the recording, and Venus has examined the body. Robert killed Himber."

"But Robert couldn't have killed Himber without a direct order from me. He couldn't..."

"Matt!" Steve cut in, "Venus and I are returning to Fireball. Zodiac out."

Doctor Adams stood up. "Colonel Zodiac, I demand that you arrest Professor Matic for the murder of Professor Himber. I will accompany you to Fireball XL5 to see that justice is done."

## Chapter 6

Ten minutes later, Steve, Venus and Doctor Adams were aboard Fireball XL5. Matt listened with horror to Steve's account of the death of Professor Hember. He led the way to the science lab where Robert lay on the work bench - in pieces.

"I took him apart to see if I could find what caused him to hijack the ship..."

"Well he can stay that way until we get back to Earth. We can't take any risks."

"Quite so Colonel." Doctor Adams agreed, "And Professor Matic should be locked in a cell."

"But... But..." Matt protested. "You don't think I..."

Venus stared at Steve, "Steve, you aren't really going to arrest the Professor are you?"

Steve could feel that Doctor Adams was also staring at him, but he didn't look in his direction. "Matt, I'm going to have to confine you to your quarters for the trip back to Earth."

"But why?"

Doctor Adams' voice was cold as ice, "Because, Professor Matic, you are going to be put on trial for murder."

"...Bu-but that's crazy Steve" protested Matt, "You of all people know I would never have ordered Robert to kill Hember."

"Matt - I'll do everything I can to prove your innocence once we get back to Space City but you must remain in your quarters until we land."

"But Steve, I need to carry out more tests on Robert to see why he..."

"Lock him in your space jail, Colonel!" cut in Doctor Adams.

"Shut up, Adams" said Steve coldly "I'll deal with my crew my own way."

"Okay, Steve" said Matt, "I'll stay in my cabin – if it keeps Doctor Adams happy"

"Please, Matt – don't antagonise Doctor Adams," said Venus quietly as she accompanied the Professor to his quarters, leaving Steve and Adams alone in the science lab.

"Doctor Adams. I respect your authority on QX7. On this ship - I give the orders," said Steve firmly.

-----

When Venus returned, a short while later, the atmosphere was still tense.

"Colonel Zodiac, is it now your intention to take the prisoner to Earth?"

"It is now my intention, Doctor Adams, to report the situation to Space City."

"Venus, I want you to remain here with Doctor Adams while I call up Space City. Doctor Adams, I will inform Space City of your communications situation, and have them send out a repair crew immediately."

-----

Half an hour later, Steve returned to the science lab.

"Well, Colonel?" Adams asked, "What are your orders?"

"I've been unable to contact Space City," Steve told him, "the neutroni radio is inoperative."

"How very convenient, Colonel." said Doctor Adams.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said Colonel."

"What are we going to do, Steve?" asked Venus.

"We'll head for Earth immediately, and alert Commander Zero of the situation."

"In that case, Colonel, I'm travelling to Earth with you. And please raise no objections, I am within my rights."

Steve clenched his fists but nodded politely, "As you wish Doctor Adams."

-----

A short time later Fireball XL5 was leaving the QX7 asteroid and heading back into deep space.

"How's that course coming along Venus?" Steve called over the intercom.

Venus sat at the circular desk in the navigation bay studying star charts on the large spacemograph screen.

"Steve, set course 2-1-9 zero green."

"2-1-9 zero green" Steve repeated as he adjusted the ship's course. "I guess we should be back on Earth in about nine hours."

"What will happen Steve?"

"I can't say Venus. I guess there will be a Board of Inquiry. They'll look at all the facts and then..."

In Fireball's lounge Doctor Adams sat and listened to the intercom conversation with interest. He was quite certain that Professor Matic had murdered Himber - but he wondered if Colonel Zodiac was an accomplice. He refused to consider that Doctor Venus might also be involved. He walked over to the large windows and activated the blinds.

-----

Steve began to feel uneasy as he piloted the spaceship. The stars didn't seem to be in the right patterns for the homeward voyage. He looked down towards the central viewer on his forward console, then hit the intercom switch, "Say Venus could you check that course again."

"What's the problem Steve?"

"I don't think you've got it right."

Venus frowned. She knew she wasn't as good a navigator as Matt, but she was no tootie when it came to simple course calculations. "Okay Steve. I'll recheck."

Steve had no difficulty noticing the slight irritation in Venus's voice.

"I've checked Steve. We are on course for Earth."

Steve bit his lip. "I'll come and take a look. You must have made a mistake..."

Leaving the ship on auto pilot Steve strolled back towards the navigation bay. Women could be so stubborn sometimes.

Venus stood up as Steve entered the navigation bay.

"Mind if I take a look at your calculations?" Steve said as he eased himself into the seat the Doctor had vacated. "Let's see..." He adjusted the star charts and cross checked the figures on the astroscope.

"Well?" Venus said coolly. "Do you still think my course is incorrect?"

Steve glanced at her and back to the monitor, "Venus... This is serious. The ship's navigational systems are acting very oddly. I get the same result as you did - but we are not heading for Earth..."

"Then where are we heading Steve?"

"The planet Granatoid!" Steve rose from his seat and rushed to the door, "I don't know what goes on here but I'm going stop the ship and put us in free-

float until we've got to the bottom of this." Steve stopped in surprise. "Venus! The door, it's been sealed!"

In the lounge Doctor Adams had almost completed his initial report on the killing. He leafed through the pages with some satisfaction. He felt a little drowsy now and stifled a yawn.

Steve leaned against the navigation bay door, "It's no good Venus, both doors are sealed, I can't budge them."

"We need Matt's help Steve, I'll call him." she switched on the intercom, "Professor? Matt? Are you there?"

"Of course I'm here!" Matt responded angrily, "Where else would I be? I'm confined to quarters."

Steve spoke hurriedly, "Matt, we need your help. The Nav Bay doors have sealed us in."

"I can't help that Steve; I'm locked in my cabin."

Venus shook her head, "But Steve... I didn't lock his door. I didn't think it was necessary."

"Well someone's sealed my door - and it's getting a mite cold in here I might add."

Venus hurried over to a control panel on the wall. "Steve, the temperature is dropping and.... the oxygen level too."

"Take an oxygen pill Venus. Matt you too, take an oxygen pill. We've got a problem with the life support systems."

"But Steve... "Venus said worriedly, "Doctor Adams - he won't have any oxygen pills. At this rate of depletion he won't be able to breathe in another twenty minutes..."



Steve kicked the door uselessly. "If only I had my raygun." He turned back to the intercom panel. "Matt? Matt can you hear me?" Steve switched channels, "Doctor Adams! Can you hear me Doctor Adams?"

"Oh Steve!" Venus exclaimed, "Now we've lost the intercom..."

Steve leaned against the bulkhead, deep in thought.

"There's a maintenance panel on the starboard hull," said Steve.

"But if we open the panel this room will decompress - all the air will be sucked out into space," said Venus.

"Yeah - and us too if we can't hold on." Steve activated a switch on the control panel and a couch rose up out of the floor. "Strap yourself down on the acceleration couch Venus. The gravity field will keep you in place. I'll grab a hold of something while we blow the hatch."

Venus watched as Steve took two pairs of magnetic sole-plates from a locker. "The only way we can get to Adams is by walking over the hull to the lounge emergency airlock."

Venus sat on the couch, strapping on her sole-plates. "You can't take the risk of being blown out into space Steve."

"We don't have any other choice Venus. "

"The couch can protect both of us from the pressure. As your Doctor of space medicine I order you to take appropriate safety precautions."

A minute later Steve activated the hatch control and dived for the acceleration couch. Venus gasped as Steve landed on top of her and then everything went black.

The navigation bay exploded with sound. Air rushed out of the newly created opening in the hull, loose objects were thrown about and there

were sounds of breaking glass. Then there was no sound at all and the room was in darkness.



## Chapter 7

“Steve?” Venus said groggily, “Is that you?”

Steve brushed broken glass from his hair. “Yes - I think we did it.”

“We did?” said Venus her eyes opening wide in the darkness.

Steve disentangled himself from Venus and got slowly off the acceleration couch, feeling his magnetic sole plates stick to the navigation bay floor. He then helped Venus to her feet. It took a few seconds for their eyes to adjust to the darkness but eventually they saw the faint starlight shining through the hole where the maintenance panel had been.

A few minutes later they had escaped the confines of the navigation bay and were walking across the outer hull of Fireball XL5.

Even though they were wearing magnetic sole plates this was a very dangerous manoeuvre with the ship at full thrust. Under different circumstances they would both have marvelled at the beauty of folded space around them but without a safety line one slip would almost certainly prove fatal. They had to concentrate on every step.

The oxygen pills they had taken would allow them to survive and speak to each other in the vacuum of space for another hour or so but they had to reach Doctor Adams in less than 20 minutes.

“Be careful Venus,” said Steve as they headed for the emergency airlock next to the lounge windows on the port side of the ship.

It took them 15 minutes to reach the airlock and then a further 2 minutes to manually open the outer door and close it behind them.

"Hurry Steve" said Venus, "Doctor Adams doesn't have much time left"

"I know Venus, I know..."

They opened the inner door and entered the lounge to find Doctor Adams slumped semi-conscious across the circular couch.

Venus rushed over to him. "Doctor Adams! Doctor Adams wake up!"

Adams half opened his eyes as Venus eased the man into a sitting position, "Uh? What?" gasped Adams.

"Listen to me Doctor Adams, " Venus told him, "You must wake up and swallow one of these pills."

"Here, Venus" said Steve passing her a cup of cold coffee from the lounge table.

Venus forced some of the dark liquid into Adams mouth and he revived a little. "Difficult to breath..." he gasped.

"Yes, yes. It's okay Doctor. Just swallow this oxygen pill..."

Adams managed to gulp down the pill with some more cold coffee, then he slumped back on the sofa.

Venus watched him anxiously as colour returned to his cheeks and his breathing stabilized.

Adams opened his eyes again, and struggled to focus them, "What... Happened... Doctor?"

"There is a problem with the life support systems," she told him. "Both the lounge doors are sealed," said Steve coming back over to the couch after trying them.

"We have got to get the life support online again soon or we are in serious trouble" said Steve.

"Has the ship been holed Colonel?"

"That's the most likely cause Doctor."

Steve walked back to the airlock "Venus, stay with Doctor Adams. Matt should be okay for a while if he's taken an oxygen pill. I'm going across the hull to get to central control. Got to stop Fireball and put her on free float so we can check the hull for damage."

As Steve headed for the lounge airlock the intercom suddenly activated.

"Steve! Can you hear me?"

"That's Matt!" Steve exclaimed as he hurriedly switched on a nearby wall intercom unit. "Matt - how's your oxygen supply?"

"I'm just attending to it Steve. I should have life support back on in a few minutes. It was getting a little stuffy in my quarters so I decided to go get some air..."

"But how?"

"I managed to crawl through a ventilation duct. Mighty tight squeeze, but I got down to rear control. Guess I'm fitter than you both think..."

"Well done Professor!" Venus called.

"Matt, we got to the lounge by taking a stroll across the hull. Can you free up the doors?"

"I'll work on that when I've got the life support back on manual. Steve, the computers have gone haywire. Had to shut down what I could to get a manual over-ride."

"Matt, we're still coasting at space velocity 5 - can you fire the retros and bring us to a full stop?"

There was a delay before Matt responded, "I can't disengage the flight computers Steve. She's locked on auto-pilot."

"Steve." Venus called over from a wall panel, "The air is almost back to normal oxygen content and the heating is normal temperature again!"

"Did you hear that Matt?" Steve said, "You did a great job."

There was no reply from the intercom.

"Matt? Unseal the doors and I'll come and give you a hand with the flight controls."

"Steve..." Matt's voice had a strained sound to it. "There's something manipulating the main computer - from the inside!"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Something's got into the neutronic pathways. It's intelligent Steve, it's acting like it's alive."

"Alive?" Venus was astonished.

"Wait..." Matt called, "I'm getting some kind of text message on the monitor screen..."

There was a long pause and then they heard Matt mutter, "This is crazy..."

"Matt, what's going on back there?"

"Steve, I'm getting a message that Hiber is controlling Fireball!"

"But Matt," Venus protested, "Professor Hiber is dead..."

"Someone is claiming that Hiber is inside the computers Venus!"

"Matt," Steve almost shouted, "WHO is telling you all this?"

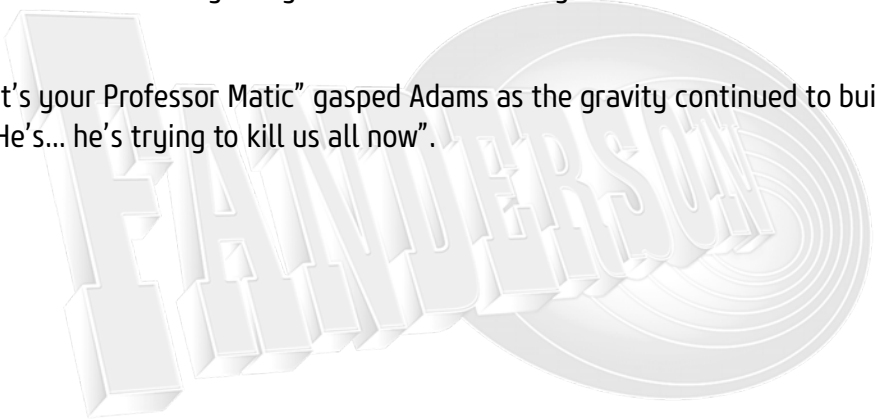
"Trying to find out Steve. I'm ah using the keyboard to ask questions. Whoever it is they insist they are Professor Al Hember."

There was another pause.

Suddenly Steve, Venus and Dr Adams felt their bodies become as heavy as lead.

"What's happening, Matt?" Steve demanded. "The artificial gravity has just increased and it's getting worse. We can hardly move in here".

"It's your Professor Matic" gasped Adams as the gravity continued to build. "He's... he's trying to kill us all now".



## CHAPTER 8

Abruptly, the gravity lessened.

Steve got unsteadily to his feet. "Gravity's back to normal. Are you two okay?"

Venus looked anxiously at Doctor Adams. He was no spaceman. He was a middle aged man, used to a desk job. She wondered if his body could withstand the stresses that were being inflicted on it.

Doctor Adams nodded to her as if reading her thoughts. "I'm perfectly all right - no thanks to that lunatic at the controls."

"Professor Matic is no lunatic Doctor Adams..." Steve began, then he caught Venus's pained expression and hurried to her side, "Venus?"

"Oh... I'm okay Steve. I'm just wondering about poor Matt. Doctor Adams might be right."

Steve was shocked, "Do you think so Venus?"

Venus shook her head, "I just don't know. I need to talk to him to assess his mental state."

"Steve!" Matt called frantically over the intercom, "Are you all alright?"

"Yes, I think so, but what happened?" asked Steve.

"I... I tried to disobey Professor Himber. He asks me to tell you that you are his prisoners and are confined to the ship's lounge. If you try to leave you will be made to suffer. The Professor has complete control over the ship's environmental systems."

Doctor Adams and Doctor Venus exchanged meaningful looks...

---



Venus walked over to the intercom unit.

"Professor. I would like to speak to you in private. Can I join you in rear control?"

"I'm afraid you can't, Venus" responded Matt, "Himber wants you all to stay in the lounge... until we land on Granatoid. He'll switch life support off again if we disobay him."

"Matthew", asked Venus in her most soothing, professional voice, "How can Himber still be alive in the ship's computers?"

"I don't know," Matt said desperately, "but he is I tell you. It must be the ch  
—"

Suddenly the intercom cut off and they could not switch it back on.

"The man's mad. Mad as a hatter" said Doctor Adams "Colonel Zodiac, you have to regain control of this ship from Matic otherwise he will kill us all."

"Shut up Adams" said Steve, looking worried.

"Steve, we know Matt has been overworking recently. Maybe..."

"Venus, I'd stake my life on Matt's sanity" cut in Steve.

"Very touching Colonel, " Adams said coldly, "How many more murders will it take to bring you to your senses?"

" Now what did he say" mused Steve. " It must be the... chip'. He was talking about Himber's cerebral circuit."

"If it is Himber controlling Fireball he obviously wants to go to Granatoid" said Venus. " I wonder why?"

"Looks like we may just have to sit tight and wait until we get there to find out" replied Steve.

“If Matic doesn’t kill us the Granatoid robots will” added Doctor Adams morosely.



## Chapter 9

In the rear control room more text scrolled across the monitor screen quicker than Matt could read it: "I want you to reassemble that transparent excuse for a robot. I shall have need of Robert when we land on Granatoid. He will also make communicating with you much easier"

"I refuse to help you, Himer – or whoever you are" typed Matt.

Suddenly Matt felt his body become as heavy as lead again.

Matt forced his heavy hands to type: "Okay I'll reassemble Robert, just turn the gravity back to normal. Please"

The artificial gravity immediately returned to normal.

Matt's mind raced. He realised Himer's wish to apologise to the crew of XL5 for his previous actions, the cerebral chip and then his 'death' had all been part of some carefully staged masterplan to take control of Robert and then Fireball itself so that he could get to Granatoid.

Why did he want to go to Granatoid – that ravaged planet of killer robots?

If he could only fathom the answer to that question they might be able to find some way to defeat Himer – or what ever he had now become.

-----

Matt was allowed to return to the science lab where he worked on reassembling Robert. It didn't take him long. Finally he opened the chest panel and switched on the nutomic battery. Then the Professor stepped away from the robot as it lay on the work bench, almost afraid to turn his back on it. Robert's eyes glowed steadily. The robot slowly sat upright, head turning from side to side.

“Now Robert, you just stay put.” Matt said nervously.

“Don’t be foolish Matic.” Robert said in his electronic monotone voice, “You will join the other prisoners. I have work to do.”

“Himber?” Matt asked, incredulously.

“I control this robot . It will serve me well.” Robert replied, moving towards the Professor. “Join the others Professor - unless you would like to be disassembled yourself.”

“I’m going. But do you realise the Granatoids will destroy this ship if we approach their world?”

“They won’t. I have something they want. If you give me no trouble I may ask them to spare your lives.”

“Maybe...maybe I can help you” said Matt quickly, grasping at straws, trying not to let the conversation end – what had Himber got that the Granatoid robots wanted?

“You can’t fool me, Matic” said Robert. “Go and join the others before you annoy me any further”

Matt realised there was no point arguing with Himber and left the science lab heading for XL5’s lounge – corridor doors opening before him as if there was nothing wrong with them.

A few minutes later he entered the lounge and received a mixed welcome as the doors closed behind him.

Steve and Venus were pleased to see him – but Matt could sense they were also wary.

“You’re a mad man, Professor Matic” shouted Doctor Adams with outright hostility in his voice, “I should have recognised the signs the moment I laid eyes on you when you visited my hospital.”

“Shut up, Adams” said Steve without looking at the man.

He went over to check the lounge doors – they were locked again as expected.

Venus gently guided Matt over to the circular couch around the coffee table and sat him down next to her.

“Can you ask your friend to let us have some coffee, Matthew?” asked Venus.

“He’s not my..” shouted Matt, then he realised Venus was carefully watching his reaction to her question and forced himself to calm down.

“Steve, Venus – you’ve just gotta believe me about Himber” said the Professor as calmly as possible, almost pleading with his crew mates. “He’s got something the Granatoids want, Steve”

“What do the Granatoids fear, Matt?” asked Steve.

“Plyton! Plyton radiation, of course” gasped Matt, with a look of horror on his face. “If Himber can make the Granatoid robots immune to plyton the whole galaxy is in trouble. I just hope to goodness I’m wrong Steve”

Suddenly the automatic coffee maker rose from the lounge table presenting them with four steaming cups of their favourite beverage – Himber had been listening to them even though the intercom unit was switched off....

## Chapter 10

The days passed as Fireball XL5 plunged on into the starry void.

Himber had allowed the captives access to the living areas of the ship but had forbade them from going anywhere else.

Relationships were very strained. Doctor Adams was still convinced that Matt was responsible for everything and Venus watched the Professor carefully, hoping Matt was sane - but fearing the worst.

“We’ll be entering the Granatoid system in about fourteen hours I reckon.” Matt commented one morning as he sat in the lounge with the others.

Adams said nothing. He just stared out of the large windows as the stars drifted by.

“They’ll fire on us for sure.” Steve said gloomily, “If only we could reason with... with the Professor.”

Venus squeezed Steve’s hand. She knew he felt as she did, not wanting to question Matt’s sanity, but there was that nagging doubt.

Suddenly Adams dropped his cup of hot coffee on to the carpet as he stood up suddenly. “What was THAT???” he said pointing to the window.

They had all seen it - a huge tumbling rocky boulder that had passed within fifty feet of the ship.

Steve rushed to the windows, staring outside. “It’s an asteroid field!” He switched on the ship’s intercom. “Himber? Let me pilot the ship - you’ll never get us through those asteroids. Robert can’t react fast enough - we’ll...”

Roberts voice responded, “You cannot trick me Zodiac. You will remain where you are.”

Matt was standing beside Steve, he shook his head, “You’re right Steve, there’s no way Robert can pilot the ship through this field at high speed.”

“Himber!” Steve yelled, “Slow down - we’re going too fast!”

There was no reply.

Doctor Adams had turned white, “Do something Colonel!”

Venus said nothing, but Steve saw in her pleading eyes that she echoed Adam’s thoughts.

Steve’s knuckles tightened. He turned to Doctor Adams, “Doctor Adams - you have to reason with... with... Professor Himber - you are our only chance. Get him to stop the ship before it’s too late.”

Doctor Adams stared. He’d suddenly been put on the spot. It was he who had to act. He struggled to compose himself as he stepped stiffly over to the intercom. “Professor ...Himber??. do you hear me?”

“Yes Doctor Adams. I hear you.” Robert’s voice replied.

Venus pointed in horror at another tumbling rock as it raced past the ship.

“Professor Himber.... Al... Please listen to me.”

“I am listening to you... David.”

Adams felt his spine tingle at the robot’s use of his first name. He swallowed hard. Could it really be Himber? “Listen Al. You’ve been under a great strain. Let me help you. Stop the ship Al.”

“I can’t do that Dave,” the electronic voice replied.

“Al - you must stop the ship. Let us help you.” Adams said, desperately trying to stay calm.

There was a click as the intercom circuit was closed.

“We’ve had it...” breathed Matt.

Suddenly a terrible stomach churning vibration ran through Fireball accompanied by a screeching metallic sound that almost deafened the occupants of the ship's lounge.

In less than 5 seconds it was all over but it left everyone shaken.

"What was that?" questioned Venus

"I reckon we were just kissed goodnight, Venus," said Matt "One of the asteroids must have scrapped along the hull – we're lucky it wasn't a direct hit"

"Himber" shouted Steve. "Do you want any more proof that Robert can't fly us through this asteroid field?"

"I am listening, Zodiac" replied Robert's voice over the intercom. "What are your suggestions?"

"Fire the retros and change course, Himber. Get above the asteroid field and then put Fireball on free float. Matt and I need to go outside and see what damage that asteroid has done"

"I agree, Zodiac – but only you will go outside" said Robert's voice, "If you try to trick me I will not hesitate to leave you outside. Please remember that"

"I'll need a thruster pack, oxygen pills and a radio so that I can discuss damage repairs with Professor Matic – and access to the equipment bays once I'm outside."

Minutes later Fireball sat in free float above the asteroid field.

The forward lounge doors opened and Robert walked in carrying the thruster pack, oxygen pills and radio Steve had asked for.

"You may leave XL5 by the lounge airlock, Zodiac" said Robert, dropping the items at Steve's feet.



“Be careful, Steve” said Venus, helping him on with the thruster pack.

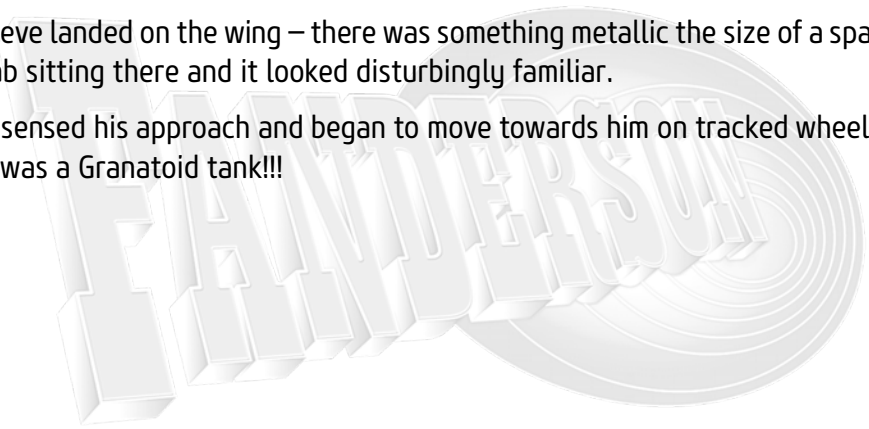
Steve took an oxygen pill and entered the emergency airlock on the Lounge wall – personal radio clipped to his belt.

He was soon outside the ship again and begun to survey the hull for signs of damage.

“Everything seems fine, Matt” said Steve into his radio some ten minutes later. “I can’t see any major damage on Junior or the Main Body. No, no wait...I can see something on the starboard wing. I’m going to investigate”

Steve landed on the wing – there was something metallic the size of a space cab sitting there and it looked disturbingly familiar.

It sensed his approach and began to move towards him on tracked wheels - it was a Granatoid tank!!!



## Chapter 11

Inside Fireball's lounge the atmosphere was tense as the minutes ticked by..  
"What's happening out there Matt?" Venus asked as she tried to see from the lounge windows.

"I don't know Venus, " Matt replied nervously, "The radio channel is still open but Steve just doesn't respond."

Suddenly Robert lumbered forward. The robot had stood silently by the door since bringing the equipment Steve had needed. His claw hands reached towards Venus menacingly.

Doctor Adams rushed to her side, "Stay away from her!"

Robert ignored the man and grabbed one of Venus's arms before she could move away.

Adams struck the robot with his fists, "Let her go!"

"Don't do that Dave." Robert said impassively, dragging Venus towards the airlock door and ignoring Doctor Adam's futile assault.

Matt hurried to help Adams but they were both suddenly thrown to the floor as if an unseen hand had struck them.

"You forget gentlemen... " Robert said without turning to face them, "I control this ship. I can use the ship's gravity to crush you like the insects you are."

"Where are you taking Doctor Venus?" Matt called painfully.

"She will join Zodiac outside the ship if he does not return swiftly - but without oxygen pills. Then you will soon follow her."

-----

“Earth vessel. You have entered Granatoid Space and will now be destroyed.”

The chilling words seemed to echo around the lounge originating from every intercom and radio system aboard Fireball.

The voice was electronic and monotone - not unlike Robert’s but higher in pitch.

Everyone froze in shock.

Robert released Venus, much to her relief and left the lounge faster than Matt had ever seen him move before.

“Out of the frying pan...” muttered Matt half to himself.

-----

Steve Zodiac had thought he was a dead man when the Granatoid tank fired its forward ray cannon at him and everything went black. Now with consciousness slowly returning he realised he had only been stunned and found himself sitting on a steel bench in what must be the alien vessel’s control cabin.

He struggled against the metallic restraints that bound his arms, glaring at his Granatoid captors.

At least they had not removed his thruster pack. He’d never been this close to one of these strange machine creatures before. Indeed, few men had - and lived to tell the tale. Granatoids were robotic in appearance, but rumour was that they were ‘alive’. This of course depended on which definition of ‘life’ was chosen to make the assessment. As Steve watched the Granatoids move about their craft he was very aware that if they were ‘robots’ then they were far more advanced machines than Robert - or any other robot known to Man.

Suddenly Steve was hauled to his feet by one of them. The Granatoid stood in front of him, its emotionless face staring intently. "You will continue to function. Your usefulness is being evaluated."

"Who is in command here?" Steve demanded.

"The Granatoids." the creature replied without humour.

-----

"What now?" Doctor Adams asked as he sat in XL5's lounge.

Matt shrugged, "I guess we bide our time and take our chance when it comes."

"Our chance? Do you really think we have one?" Adams asked hopelessly. "No man has ever been to Granatoid."

"Nor woman." Venus added. "Steve will do something."

"My dear lady, " Adams said softly, "I think we have to face the fact that he's more than likely dead..."

"Himber must have convinced the Granatoids not to destroyed us – so yes I still think we have a chance" said Matt in an effort to convince himself as much as the others.

"...and Steve is still alive Doctor Adams – I know he is" added Venus.

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Steve wondered why the Granatoid had not killed him outright.

Mankinds first encounters with the Granatoid robots over 30 years ago had been disastrous – nothing would stop them at first. Missiles and ray guns were useless. They seemed invulnerable to every kind of weapon. Hundreds of space colonists had been slaughtered before the rare mineral plyton had been discovered on one of the colony worlds.

Plyton was the only defence against the Granatoids – its crystals were found to emit a radiation that was harmless to humans but for some unknown reason completely disrupted the robots electronic systems.

The Granatoids were forced to retreat back to their home planet once plyton radiation weapons were used against them.

All available plyton had been mined to produce the isotopes needed to power those radiation weapons - isotopes with a very short half life measured only in decades.

From that day on Mankind had avoided the Granatoid world like the plague in the knowledge that the robots would not be so easily repelled in the future unless more plyton could be discovered.

The weapons produced 30 years ago would be virtually useless against the robots now.

Steve would rather die than reveal that fact to the Granatoids.

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Venus, Matt and Doctor Adams still sat in the lounge feeling completely helpless to influence the horrific events that were unfolding around them.

They could see through the lounge windows that Fireball was under flight again and the huge pale grey disc of planet Granatoid was looming ever larger.

Venus turned to the nearest intercom panel. "Professor Hember, please tell me what has happened to Steve."

"Do not worry Doctor Venus" came Robert's voice in response. "I am sure our Granatoid friends will take good care of him. Now do not bother me while I land this spaceship of yours. I would hate to damage it".

## Chapter 12

Fireball XL5 came into land in what appeared to be a vast sprawling brightly lit space port with launch sites and landing pads stretching into the distance as far as the eye could see.

No sooner had she touched down than the spaceship was surrounded by Granatoid tanks.

Sitting in the pilot's chair in Fireball's main control cabin Robert switched on the local UHF radio transmitter: "Robots of Granatoid. I am the great Professor Al Himber. I have already offered you immunity from plyton radiation. I can also help you conquer every planet in the galaxy if you accept me as your leader. We can create the perfect robotic civilisation together." The announcement in Robert's electronic monotone voice was transmitted on all frequencies and also relayed over every intercom system within the ship.

Steve Zodiac and his captors could hear the transmission from within the Granatoid tank that was still sitting on Fireball's starboard wing.

"Himber is insane" shouted Steve to the three robot crew. "Do not listen to him."

One of the Granatoids turned to him. "You will remain silent or be destroyed."

Steve was in no position to argue. He suddenly felt the tank lurch forwards until it left XL5's wing and hovered in the air next to the spaceship. It now slowly descended to the landing pad and joined the other alien tanks surrounding Fireball.

The electronic voice of the Granatoids suddenly burst from XL5's intercom speakers again. "Professor Humber. Your offer has been evaluated. We only require immunity from plyton radiation. We do not require a leader. We will destroy your space vessel if you do not upload the plyton immunity program to the Granatoid Command network without delay."

Robert's voice responded immediately: "The fact that you refuse my offer to lead you is proof enough to me that your inferior positronic brains need my help. You must realise that my superior intellect and knowledge of robotics will make you masters of the universe. To show my goodwill to all Granatoid robots I will now upload the program that will remove your fear of plyton radiation as requested. Yes, I use the word 'fear'. I have deduced that the organic race that originally created you built a safeguard into your programming - so that you could be repelled by plyton if you ever threatened them. You have therefore only been programmed to believe plyton radiation can harm you. It cannot physically damage you. I am uploading the plyton immunity program now."

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Steve had never felt so helpless. His arms were still tightly bound and he was surrounded by indestructible robots on an alien exoplanet many light years from home. Robots that would soon have their only weakness removed.

Suddenly the three Granatoid robots who sat at the tanks controls became completely motionless. They appeared to have been deactivated.

All electronic equipment within the tank was now silent. All control panels were now in darkness. It looked like a total systems failure.

Steve felt the metallic restraints fall away from his arms.

What the hell was going on?

He had to get back aboard Fireball and try and find out. He found the tanks side hatch. Thankfully it was designed to be opened manually by operating a lever.

With a struggle it opened and Steve jumped down onto the landing pad. All the Granatoid tanks surrounding Fireball were now silent and motionless as well. The whole space port was in total darkness.

Steve activated his thruster pack and flew up towards the emergency airlock into XL5's lounge. It seemed like an eternity since he had last left the ship and discovered the Granatoid tank on the wing and yet it could have been no more than an hour as he had not needed to take another oxygen pill.

Venus, Matt and Adams were relieved to see Steve enter the lounge.

He quickly updated them on his capture and what had happened after Himber had started uploading his plyton immunity program.

They could get no response from Himber over the intercom so had to assume that Robert was also out of action along with all of the Granatoid robots.

But how long would this inactivity last and what was causing it?

"I don't think it is just a plyton immunity program," said Matt. "I suspect Himber has uploaded the cerebral program that was encoded on the chip he tricked me into installing in Robert.

If so it must be overwriting every Granatoid robots programming with a copy of Himber's consciousness. Things could not get much worse – and it's all my fault."



## Chapter 13

Matt suddenly had a eureka moment. “Steve, we’ve gotta take all of Fireball’s computers off line and deactivate Robert before Himber becomes active again.”

To everyone’s relief all of the previously locked doors beyond the ships living quarters were now operating normally again.

Steve and Matt both ran for the main control cabin to deactivate Robert while Venus headed for life support.

All computer controls had to be switched off and Himber’s consciousness program purged from Robert and the ships computers.

Fireball XL5 had been designed so that it could be operated under strictly manual control in an emergency – and this was definitely an emergency.

In the main control cabin they found Robert sitting motionless in the pilot’s seat. Matt quickly flicked Robert’s deactivation switch while Steve began shutting down the ships flight computers.

“Help me get Robert onto the deck so I can take him apart,” said Matt. “I’m not risking Himber taking control of him again.”

Robert was soon a pile of robot body parts stored away in Fireball Junior’s jetmobile bay.

Soon Fireball's environmental and navigational computer systems were also offline.

The crew of Fireball XL5 now joined Doctor Adams in the lounge to report that all deactivation work had been carried out.

Matt reasoned that the fact there had been no resistance from Hiber to any of this activity suggested his cerebral program was locked in a deadly embrace with the Granatoid robots. That would explain why they all appeared to have been shut down.

"Let's get out of here while we can" said Adams, still finding it hard to accept Hiber's consciousness had been transferred into Robert's positronic brain from a computer chip. Even harder to accept was that Hiber had been able to produce the device at his hospital as part of his therapy.

"I'm afraid we will all have to stay at our stations to manually control the ship during our flight back to Earth," said Steve.

"Once our computer systems have all been purged back at Space City we'll have to install more robust firewalls to stop anything like Hiber's chip taking control of the ship or Robert again" added Matt.

"What about the Granatoids?" queried Venus. "What can we do to stop them invading the Galaxy again now they are immune to pylon?"

"I think Hiber has unwittingly resolved that problem for us," said Matt thoughtfully. "The Granatoid robots are now effectively all copies of Hiber. They all want to be the Granatoid leader. That must be what has

led to the deadly embrace they are all now locked in. Hopefully their programming will never be able to break free of it.

Let's hope we have finally seen the end of the Granatoids ... and ironically we have Al Himer to thank for that."

**The End**

