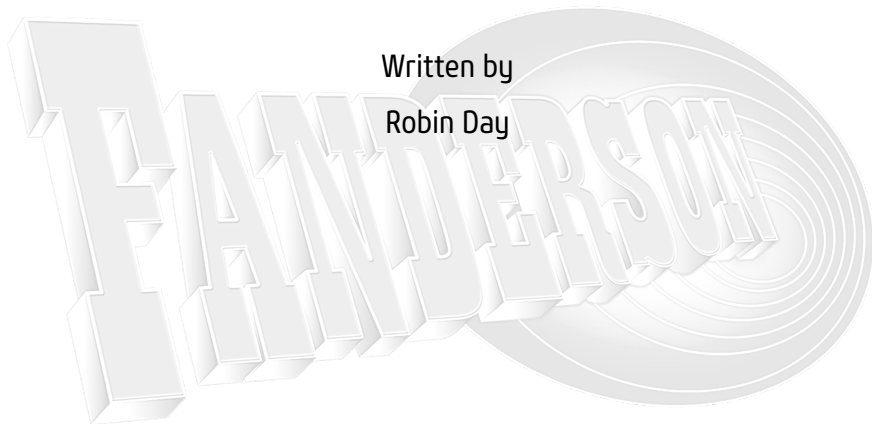


OUT OF TIME

A Fireball XL5 and Supercar Story

Written by

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Chapter 1

Masterplan

Masterspy had been plotting to steal Supercar ever since he first saw the amazing vehicle. It vexed him that so far all his efforts had been thwarted. This made him all the more determined to have Supercar - it had become a deep-seated grudge match against Mike Mercury and his friends. Masterspy liked to win - and he didn't care too much about the methods he employed. Now he had a foolproof scheme. He'd spent weeks making careful plans and now - he showed Zarin, his henchman, the file of papers detailing his master plan.

"What do you think friend Zarin?" he asked with a strong eastern European accent.

Zarin considered carefully. From experience he knew that whatever response he made - it would be the wrong one.

He lowered his eyes, "Er, very good Masterspy. I like it."

Masterspy eyed Zarin carefully, "Go on."

"This time you will succeed I am sure of it."

Zarin steeled himself for the response.

Masterspy nodded, and smiled broadly.

"Very good, very good Zarin. I am amused."

"You are?" Zarin asked nervously.

"Why yes my friend. I am most impressed by your humour - and your grasp of the situation."

Masterspy chuckled, "This TIME, Zarin, this TIME we will most definitely succeed!"

In their remote Nevada desert home, the Supercar team were blissfully unaware of any masterplans detrimental to their continued health and happiness.

"Are you ready Beaker?" Professor Popkiss called, "Ze taxi is waiting you know."

Popkiss and Beaker were the co-inventors of Supercar. Both expert scientists in their fields, and extremely dedicated to their project.

Doctor Beaker had a tendency to get so immersed in his work that he became somewhat absent-minded at times. "Ah... yes...very ah.... punctual, most punctual," he acknowledged in his precise, accentless English.

Mike Mercury was their test pilot - a man of action. Right now he was looking forward to a little inactivity and a can of beer in front of the t.v. "Well, Doc, I guess you'd better be off," he encouraged. "You want to be on time at the demonstration."

"Quite so Mike. Quite so." Beaker nodded absently as he picked up his briefcase and headed out to the waiting car. "Goodbye then Mike, goodbye Jimmy."

Jimmy waved, "Bye, Doctor Beaker, goodbye Professor." He sounded a little sad at not going too. Jimmy was just a child - but he was keen, and a valuable member of the team.

"See you both soon" called Mike, already making for the refrigerator for his beer, "Enjoy your trip."

"Ve vill." called back Professor Popkiss - take care of Supercar von't you?"

"Roger Professor." Mike waved as the taxi drove off.

"Gee Mike," Jimmy grumbled, "I sure wish we could have gone along too. It sounds exciting."

Mike shrugged, "Oh, I don't think there'll be anything much to see Jimmy - just a bunch of crusty old scientists talking and writing things on blackboards."

"I guess so Mike." Jimmy didn't sound convinced,

"Anyway Jimmy, cheer up, Bill's bringing Mitch back in a few hours. I guess the place is too quiet without him."

Mitch was Jimmy's pet chimpanzee - and he was as much a part of the Supercar team as anyone.

Jimmy smiled, "It's a good job Bill gets on with Mitch a lot better than he sometimes does with Doctor Beaker."

The next morning, at a private seminar, a scientist was talking...and writing on a blackboard.

"And so you see, " the white-haired, white coated, well-spoken man explained, as he chalked equations, "It is all here - it will work!"

In the audience another bespectacled, white-haired gentleman was unimpressed. "Poppycock!" he muttered under his breath.

Doctor Beaker was of like mind, "I tend towards agreement Popkiss."

He spoke to his colleague in hushed tones, "I concur with your evaluation, but er... perhaps we should not be too hasty."

"As you say Beaker," the Professor replied, not quite so quietly,

"At least zey put on a good lunch."

There was a murmur of amusement from people sitting within earshot.

Popkiss glanced, not for the first time, at the big clock on the wall,

"Von more hour - Zen, at von o'clock - ve eat."

Meanwhile, Doctor Samuels was continuing his lecture, blissfully unaware of the scepticism of some of the members of his audience.

"And now, a little demonstration." He turned and beckoned to a portly white-coated assistant. "This is only a prototype of course - but you will be very impressed."

The assistant was assembling a large tubular device on a tripod stand.

"Now for this demonstration..." The scientist was saying as the assistant suddenly swept the tube around in a wide arc - and vanished!

"Amazing!"

"Bravo!"

"Incredible!"

"Impressive!"

The audience applauded loudly, as if at a conjuring show.

The scientist on the stage held up his hands, a horrified look upon his face.

"Please! Listen to me! The device... my prototype Chronotizer - it has been stolen!"

Popkiss couldn't help but notice the time on the lecture room clock - One o'clock - but right now he wasn't hungry.

"Mike! Mike!" Jimmy called, "It's the Professor!"

Mike rushed to the telephone.

"What's up Professor?"

"Mike - You must come quickly in Supercar - and bring the portable console!"

"Why?" Mike was asking but Popkiss said he had no time for talking.

Mike and Jimmy exchanged glances. It looked like another adventure.

Jimmy helped Mike to get the console into Supercar. It was a scaled down version of the master console, which enabled Beaker and Popkiss to track Supercar and even fly it by remote.

Minutes later Mike had Supercar ready for take-off.

He watched the rev counters on the twin engines.

"5,000...8,000.... 12...15,000. Fire One!" Mike fired the port engine flared against the blast wall.

Jimmy operated a switch and watched with Mitch as the huge doors in the ceiling slid aside revealing the blue sky above.

"Fire two!" called Mike and another jet of smoke flared briefly.

"Good luck Mike!" called Jimmy. Mitch made a screeching noise and a 'whoohoo hoo' noise which meant much the same thing.

"Keep Mitch out of trouble 'til I get back - here goes!" Mike pushed the vertical thrust levers upwards. Supercar lifted smoothly up from the lab floor and rose into the bright cloudless Nevada sky.

A minute or so later Mike called on the radio, "Pilot to Console."

Jimmy went over to the console, "Console to pilot - go ahead Mike."

"Jimmy, I'll be with Beaker and Popkiss in about fifteen minutes - stay by the console in case we need you."

"Okay Mike - Me and Mitch will be waiting."

Mitch nodded excitedly in agreement.

"Good boy Jimmy - er I mean, Pilot to Console over and out."

A short time later Professor Popkiss and Doctor Beaker had briefed Mike on the situation.

"So you see Mike..." the Professor concluded, "...Whoever stole ze Chronotizer has a very dangerous veapon."

"Indeed yes." Added Beaker, "The consequences could be, ahm unsatisfactory - most unsatisfactory."

"Well, from what you say this Chrono thing can freeze people - how can we catch him - and come to that, how do we find him?"

"Vell Mike, finding ze Chronotizer is simple - the device emits a high frequency pulse every minute or so - it's part of ze inertial timing mechanism." Popkiss continued, "You see, ze device uses..."

"Not now Professor - just tell me where to point Supercar - and I'll get after the guy that stole the thing." Mike turned as he headed for the door, "I suppose catching him will be up to me?"

"Ah not entirely Mike." Beaker hurried after Mike, "I have a, er, 'gizmo' that may, only may mark you, neutralise the Chronotizer."

"Okay Doctor - let's go - no time to lose..."

"Er quite so pilot, quite so."

Supercar was soon heading out over the Nevada desert.

Time passed, Mike grew anxious. He called up Popkiss on the radio.

"Pilot to Console. Are you sure this is the right way Professor?"

Popkiss was scanning the instruments on the console - and a few gadgets he'd hastily wired up to it. "Quite sure Mike." He called into the radio, "ze signals output by ze Chronotizer are unmistakable."

Back in Supercar Doctor Beaker tapped the clear view screen excitedly.

"There it is Mike - that truck - it contains the ahm, device!"

"And Masterspy too I'd guess.

Beaker made some adjustments to the gadget he was holding. "We must be within two hundred yards for this to work..."

Mike glanced at Beaker, "And what if they turn that ray thing on us?"

"At this speed and altitude I dread to think. I suggest we do not allow Masterspy the opportunity to try it... Mike!" Beaker exclaimed. "Another aircraft - approaching us at great velocity - it might be a missile!"

"Okay, hang on to your seat Doc - We're going down - fast!"

Supercar's engines roared as Mike sent her into a power dive.

"Masterspy!"

"Yes Zarin! I hear it too - stop the truck!"

"But Masterspy - it is Supercar!"

"Yes my friend. All is according to plan - and this time we will be the victors! Stop the truck fool!!"

Zarin brought the truck screeching to an abrupt halt. Masterspy threw open the door and aimed the Chronotizer at the hurtling Supercar.

"What???" Masterspy exclaimed as smoke began to pour from the device.

"Masterspy!" Zarin shrieked in alarm, "Throw it away - it is going to explode!"

"No!" Masterspy exclaimed ignoring the thick black smoke, "They will not defeat me!" He triggered the device, sending a violet shimmering vortex skywards.

In Supercar Beaker called out a warning, "Mike! Look out - he's..."

"Masterspy!" Zarin exclaimed in disbelief as he saw Supercar suddenly vanish.

"Yes Zarin. YES! I, Masterspy, have destroyed them most completely and utterly! Supercar is, alas, NO MORE!!!!" Masterspy chuckled, "How VERY sad - for THEM!"



2

Close Encounters

Sometime later...

"Doc?" Mike touched Beaker's shoulder anxiously, "Are you awake? We seem to be on a ship of some kind."

Doctor Beaker opened his eyes abruptly, and realised he was lying on a bed. Mike helped him to his feet, "Mike, what on Earth has transpired?"

"This seems to be a medical bay. Maybe I can see where we are. Hey, Doctor!" Mike had walked over to one of the nearby portholes. "From the look of things - we are not on Earth..." Mike gestured at the view through the glass. "If I remember my geography correctly, I'd guess that was Earth - wayyyy down there."

Beaker hurried to join Mike at the porthole. A bright, beautiful, blue and white globe of light met Beaker's scrutiny, and ignored it. "Astonishing, quite astonishing. Why, we must be thousands of miles from Earth! How is this possible?"

"I know one thing Doctor - this ship is not one of Ours..."

"I can tell you another thing Mike - it's ahm, not one of Theirs either..."

"Then who?"

"Perhaps, ahm, that is, possible, we should not have, ah, attributed recent U.F.O. sightings to Supercar. By U.F.O. I mean 'unidentified flying object'.

"Yeah Doc, I read the papers too - 'Flying Saucers, Little Green Men....'"

A door suddenly slid open behind them.

"Do not, ahhh, panic Mike," Beaker's eyes quivered with excitement, "This would seem to be an Extra Terrestrial - ah that is, an alien being!"

The newcomer's eyes did not quiver, but they did seem to be having difficulty staying open. The alien stood there, blinking at them.

"You mean this might be the pilot?" whispered Mike. He gazed awe-struck at the sight of this small being - a being that had undoubtedly come from another planet circling another star.

"Yes indeed." Replied Beaker in hushed tones. "Leave this to me."

Beaker addressed the alien in clear, precise tones, "We are from Earth - we are, arrm... Earth Men."

The alien eyed them sleepily.

After a moments consideration it responded, "Welcome ho--o-ome."

"By Jove - it, er 'he' understands me!"

"I am Doctor Beaker and this is my, er, pilot, Mike Mercury."

"Howdy folks." Drawled the alien waving two large alien hands in their direction.

Mike stepped back a little.

Beaker was undeterred, totally engrossed in the situation. "We would like to see more of your, er spacecraft."

"Howdy folks... welcome ho-o-me."

"Oh! Zoonie - there you are!"

A feminine voice called softly as the door opened again. A beautiful blonde girl wearing a green tunic and a silver-grey jump suit entered the room.

"Ah, gentlemen - you are awake!"

"I might be I guess - but it sure as heck doesn't seem like it." Mike replied sitting back down on a bed.

The girl smiled reassuringly, "I am Doctor Venus, I see you've met Zoonie. Please wait here. Colonel Zodiac has some questions to ask you."

The door closed and Beaker and Mike were alone again.

"I think I may have one or two questions for Colonel, ahh... Zodiac when he arrives."

"What happened to us Doc? One minute we were diving down on Masterspy and the next...."

"I fear that this is not the, ahem, 'The next minute' as it were."

"Do you suppose that missile you spotted was this spaceship?"

"No Mike... I think we have been ahhh catapulted through ahhh time."

On closer inspection, the instruments and consoles you see here are futuristic perhaps, but very terrestrial in origin - based on what little I have seen of course.

Mike stood up and went over to gaze out of the porthole again, "And that girl, she certainly looked human, very human. And she sounded sort of French maybe?"

"Quite." Doctor beaker agreed absently, "But this is simply extraordinary! Time travel is just not possible!"

Mike grinned, "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

"Ah... yes. Quite, quite so Mike." Doctor Beaker looked sheepish, "Now who's the fool?"

"Doctor..." Mike lowered his voice, "Until we know more about these people - and the alien - I think we should be careful what we tell them."

"But why Mike?"

"Well, we don't know whose side they are on - they could be working for Masterspy."

Beaker looked suddenly sad.

"Doc? What's the matter?"

"My dear fellow, don't you see? Masterspy is probably long dead... long dead."

Mike didn't like to think about what that meant.

"I just don't know what to think!" Steve sounded exasperated as he discussed the situation with Matt and Venus in Fireball's lounge.

"Say Matt, is that crazy vehicle safely stowed?"

"Sure is Steve. It's down in the hold. Boy, it sure looks Boss..."

"Well I'm sure Commander Zero will ask you to take it apart when we get back to Space City. These guys sure have some explaining to do. They wouldn't tell me a thing - not even their names."

"They could be suffering from temporary amnesia Steve." Venus suggested. "I did have to treat them for mild shock and the air left in that craft of theirs was pretty well used up."

Matt nodded, "I guess we only just got to them in time...I reckon those canopy seals were never intended for open space. How in tarnation did they get out there? That machine of theirs sure ain't no spaceship. It's all mighty strange if you ask me."

Steve sighed, "That's the problem Matt - Commander Zero is going to be expecting answers - not questions."

"Well I've examined the men Steve - they are human all right. They aren't harbouring any dangerous germs either."

"But what in the universe were they doing way out there in space in that crazy contraption?" Steve asked. "It just appeared on the Space City scanners as if it popped up out of nowhere."

"Yeah, " agreed Professor Matic, "I was kinda expecting little green men - not some classy looking vintage aircar."

"What's your view Venus?" asked Steve, trying to make sense of things.

Venus grinned. "Actually Steve, the younger man is quite attractive, in a rugged sort of way..." Seeing Steve wasn't amused she continued in her best professional tones, "We'll just have to wait for the answers. Our two passengers are fast asleep. They won't give us any trouble, I've given them a sedative. They'll sleep for the rest of the trip."

"Okay", Steve stood up, "I guess I'll get back up front and get Fireball back to Earth - I could use a rest myself."

"Time travel?" Commander Zero snorted.

He 'd ordered an immediate conference as soon as Fireball XL5 landed. A mysterious craft had breached Earth's defence network as if it didn't exist - he needed to know how - and why. Matt's mention of time travel brought memories flooding back to him.

"Yes - I know it's possible - I mean I've done it myself. I think. But you reckon these guys came from the past?"

"I'm sure of it Commander." Matt looked around the conference table. "Most of us here have seen my little - demonstration..."

"Wasn't that Zoonie's demonstration?" Steve smiled.

Lieutenant Ninety frowned. "That time travel stuff was scary - I thought we'd never get you all back. Is that Supercar vehicle of theirs really a time machine Professor?"

"No, it isn't." Matt was quite certain. "It's a very versatile craft - wish I had one myself... but it sure ain't no time machine."

"Then how?" asked Commander Zero. "Why do you think that craft travelled through time?"

"Well, you can call me an old toot - but I tell you everything about that Supercar smells of the past."

"Fine" said Zero, a little sarcastically, "So, I can put in my report to World Security that Professor Mathew Matic says 'It smells like time travel'?"

"But Commander," put in Steve quickly, "Time travel could explain how that craft just popped up out of nowhere."

"And the professor is the leading authority on time travel, Commander." Lieutenant Ninety added, a little nervously.

Commander Zero eyed the young Lieutenant with irritation and was about to reply when there was a knock at the door.

"Who in blazes is that?" thundered Commander Zero, venting some of his considerable frustration at the interruption.

"May I come in?" called Venus from the other side of the door.

"Oh, Doctor Venus - come in - have you finished your medical report?"

"Better than that Commander," smiled Venus proudly as she took a seat next to Steve. "I have learned a great deal about our two visitors."

Commander Zero looked pleased, "Say Venus that's just great. So what have you found out?"

"Well gentlemen," Venus looked at the expectant faces around the table, "The two people we picked up, and their strange craft, Supercar, came from the year 1961"

"1961?!" Exclaimed her audience.

"Yes, the two men are Mike Mercury and Doctor Horatio Beaker".

Steve looked puzzled.

"How come you found out all this Venus? Did you use a truth drug?"

Venus laughed. "No Steve, that would be unethical. I just smiled and fluttered my eyelashes a little, you know. Like this." She glanced across the table and demonstrated.

Lieutenant Ninety blushed a little and looked down at his notes.

"You're kidding?" Steve suggested.

"Well, whatever you may think of my technique - here is my full report." Venus handed a sheaf of papers to each person at the table.

"But my dear fellow - you mean you told that young woman EVERYTHING?" Beaker's eyes displayed his agitation.

Mike sounded a little embarrassed, "Well, yes Doc, I guess I figured it was okay after all." He saw Beaker wasn't convinced, "I mean she seems the sort of girl you can trust - you know?"

Beaker sighed. "Er - frankly no. Mike, I don't know if this was wise."

"Well, think about it Doc. This is the future right? Venus said this is the year two thousand and sixty four. Mike gestured out of the window. "They have all THIS. They won't learn anything from us - we are, er..."

"Museum pieces?" offered Beaker seeing Mike's point.

"Yeah..."

Mike stared out of the window. He was beginning to suspect it was a new habit he'd developed. Outside he could see huge ungainly looking cylindrical vehicles taking off and landing. Cars and motorcycles were

driving here and there - without wheels. Apart from all that, things looked pretty normal - desert, scrub and clear blue sky. Almost like home. Mike tried not to think about home...

"Doc I was wondering.... This building is going around and around - but I'm not getting dizzy - and what's more - the view out of the window doesn't change."

"Yes, it is, and I'm not either - and no you are correct - the view from that window does not change - at least in so far as orientation."

Mike shrugged, "Maybe they stopped the building rotating after we got inside?"

"Possibly Mike. Were this the year 1961, I would say, most certainly. However, in this year of...2064, I would say the answer is more likely to be 'Gravity Control'.

Mike looked back at Beaker. "Gravity control?"

"Yes, my dear fellow, did you not notice that the spaceship we woke up in had gravity compensators?"

"No, guess I didn't. What do they look like?"

Beaker shook his head, "Mike, had that spaceship not been equipped with some form of 'artificial gravity' we would have floated around in there like soap bubbles." Beaker waved a hand by way of demonstration. "This technology is simply extraordinary."

"Yeah - well tomorrow morning I'm heading out to a dealer."

"A dealer?" inquired Beaker, puzzled.

"Yeah - an antiques dealer - I want to see what they'll give for a pair of priceless old antiques...."

3

Paradox

Colonel Zodiac and Commander Zero walked down broad echoing underground corridors. An armed guard followed them closely.

"What's this all about Commander?" Steve asked in hushed tones.

Zero's voice was cold, serious, "What we are about to see and discuss here Colonel is classified top level security."

"Yes sir." Steve acknowledged formally. "Gee Commander, I thought this place had been closed down years ago..."

"Yeah - that was the official story Colonel."

Zero paused beside one of the numerous sealed metal doors. On the door was a sign, "Area 51 : Bay #C3857"

Zero gestured to the guard, "Okay soldier, open her up."

Without a word the guard complied. Taking a key from a pouch on his belt he inserted it into a slot beside the door. He pressed a sequence of buttons. A light blinked and the door slid upwards. The men moved forward into an elevator. The outer door hissed closed and the elevator descended for a moment. Then the guard repeated the procedure on an inner door. It slid aside.

"Here it is Steve - Supercar!"

Steve looked. There before him was a faded red and grey vehicle, still proudly bearing the name Supercar on it's side.

"Is that?"

"The same." Replied Zero. This is Supercar - there was only one of it's kind. This craft has been in storage for the last eighty years.

Zero directed the guard to wait outside. After the door had closed behind him, Zero continued "Steve, I had Lieutenant Ninety search the computer files for anything on Doctor Beaker and Mercury. He came up with something - but he didn't have security clearance for the information."

Zero paused, "As a matter of fact - neither did I."

"Turns out this 'Supercar' and its inventors are very important people. It seems a lot of the technology we take for granted today was pioneered, at least, in theory, by Doctor Beaker and his associate, a Professor Popkiss."

"I never heard of them sir." Steve admitted, hoping that he didn't appear too ignorant to his commanding officer.

"No... neither had I, Steve." Zero was more relaxed now, having launched into the subject. "You know, most of our artificial gravity technology was roughed out by this guy Beaker? His theories were taken on board by some of the world's top scientists."

"But how come I never heard of such an important scientist?" asked Steve.

"Top Secret." Muttered Zero. "Most of this guy's work was classified top secret. The Supercar project was a platform for revolutionary research. The Supercar was used to test out new discoveries and push aeronautics and er, aquanautics into the 21st century. Without those developments there would have been no TA series of spacecraft - in fact, no manned spaceflight beyond our solar system."

"You don't say?" breathed Zodiac. "One guy did all that?"

"Not exactly Steve. He, and Popkiss, established the possibility and his theories enabled other scientists to see the way forward. Much of their work was scoffed at as 'nonsense' by their contemporaries. The fact that Supercar was very successful helped to push their work under the noses of the people who could use it."

"A couple of Einsteins eh, Commander?"

"Yeah. Guess so." Zero waited while Steve walked around the Supercar, clearly troubled.

"Say Commander, if this is the one and only Supercar - how come we've got another one back in Matt's lab?"

"That's the problem Steve - there shouldn't be."

"Those two Supercars are one and the same. I've had them checked out. There's no doubt that the two craft are identical - though one is around a hundred years older - according to the boffins."

"That's crazy," offered Steve.

"Yeah, it's crazy all right. And it's dangerous. Very dangerous." Zero lowered his voice, though no one but Steve could hear in this top security vault.

"Listen Colonel. That Supercar Matt has in the lab. It has to go back. It has to return to 1961. Otherwise... it won't wind up in this vault - and our 'present' - that is, Doctor Beaker's 'future' - might cease to exist."

"I get it Commander. If Supercar doesn't go back, then Beaker's discoveries won't be made and..."

Zero nodded, "And you could end up being an aircraft pilot instead of flying spaceships... or... Maybe not exist at all."

"Hold on Commander... we still exist right now..."

"Yeah, lucky for us. The boffins think that means that Supercar does go back and the 'time line' gets fixed. But it isn't going to fix itself Steve - we're going to have to figure out how to send Supercar - and it's crew, back in time."

Steve felt suddenly very fragile. Any moment he could suddenly cease to exist. "Well Matt thinks he can rig something up - he's a toot sometimes - but he's a bit of an Einstein himself..."

"Yeah - we're counting on Matt - he's our only expert on time travel."

Zero frowned. "It's hard Steve. I kinda like those guys. But I know everything that happened to them - when they were born - how they lived - and how and when they died..." Zero coughed, "and here they are, alive and well - until we send them back. Then they'll be part of history - dead and buried."

Commander Zero became stiffly formal once more. "Nothing you've seen or heard in this room may be disclosed to anyone."

"No sir." Steve replied, equally formally.

"It's vital that Beaker and Mercury know nothing of our technology - or that their Supercar is still in one piece in 2064." Zero sighed, "Keep this thought in mind Steve, for Beaker and Mercury this is only one possible future. For us, it's a matter of life and death or worse... non-existence. They have to return to 1961 and continue their lives as if nothing has happened."

The following morning at Space City, the Commander was attempting to enjoy his breakfast. Jonathon Zero, the Commander's young son was being his usual, charming self. "Say Dad, can I see the time machine?"

"What?" asked Commander Zero hoping he'd misheard what his son had said.

The Commander's wife tried to soothe things down, "Don't bother your father Jonathon - he's had a long trip."

"Gee Mom - Dad only went to Nevada - he didn't even go into space!"

"Jonathon!" scolded his mother.

"But gee, I only wanted to see the time machine... Everyone's talking about it!"

"There isn't any time machine!" exclaimed Zero in annoyance. "If there was a time machine I'd throw you in it and I'd get some peace around here!"

"There is a time machine! Jonathon protested. "It was on t.v. - right after the Cowboys and Moon Indians show."

Mrs Zero had to agree. "He's right dear - it was like an old-fashioned air-car - kinda like the one I learned to drive in. Wilbur, where are you going?"

"I'm going to have a word with security - or maybe several words - and they are not going to be nice words..."

Late the following night, two shadowy figures made their way silently towards a small Space City hangar.

A man's voice, "This is the one my love. It is inside."

"Of course you idiot - it would not be on the roof!" hissed a woman's voice. Her accent, like her companion's, was east European.

"Boris, get the door open."

"Yes of course... These locks are easy to open."

"Naturally, since I took the keys from the guard - I do hope he sleeps well."

The large doors swung open to reveal the sleek red outlines of Supercar.

"So, this is the Time Machine..."

"Yes my love. It looks very nice."

"Fool! I do not care what it looks like - but it will make us very powerful."

In a few minutes the two intruders had climbed into the cockpit and the woman was revving the engines.

"Grizelda, someone will hear."

"Of course they will hear - but this is a space port - no one will notice one more engine." She flicked a switch "Firing port!" the engine fired sending white smoke across the hangar.

"Are you sure you can fly this Supercar?"

"Of course, it will be child's play. A simple twin engine flyer."

She flicked another switch, "Firing starboard, how do they say? All systems they are at go!"

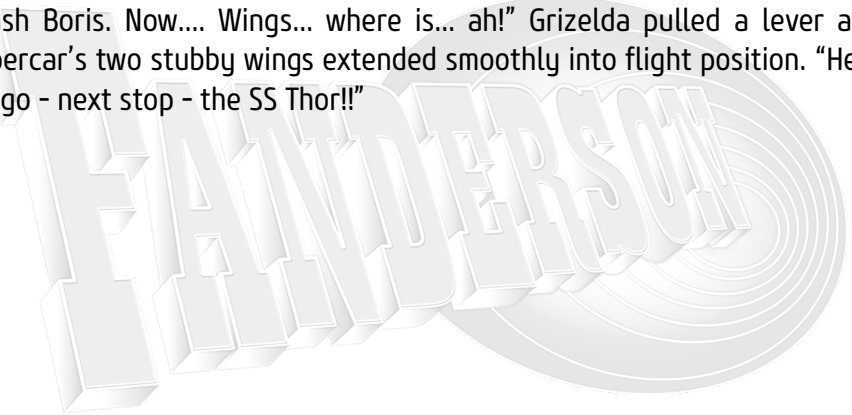
Grizelda operated the controls and Supercar rose a foot or so off the ground and began moving forwards through the open doors.

Grizelda moved Supercar faster, cruising out of the hangar and gaining speed as it sped over the desert sand.

"This is good - very good!" crooned Grizelda in deep approving tones. This is just like driving my first car!"

"Oh no!" cried Boris putting his hands over his eyes.

"Hush Boris. Now.... Wings... where is... ah!" Grizelda pulled a lever and Supercar's two stubby wings extended smoothly into flight position. "Here we go - next stop - the SS Thor!!"



4

Race Against Time

Steve Zodiac was woken by the sound of Space City's red alert klaxons. He quickly dressed and hurriedly made his way down to the control room.

He was surprised to find that Venus was already talking with Commander Zero. They were both out of uniform.

"Hello Commander, Venus. What goes on?"

"Steve!" the Commander sounded worried. "I was just about to call you."

"Steve, the Supercar..." Venus added, "it's been stolen!"

"Stolen?"

"Yeah and we know the thieves." Zero told the Colonel as he sat down at his console. "It's the Space Spies."

"Boris and Grizelda?"

"Yeah, the same. They overpowered Sergeant Mahoney, but he saw and heard enough to identify them." Zero gestured at the space scanner. "They had their ship waiting in orbit. Get after them Steve. I don't have to remind you how vital it is we get Supercar back – intact."

Steve nodded grimly "We're on our way Commander. "

As he and Venus headed for the elevator Zero called after them, "You'd better take Beaker and Mercury with you - they may be able to help. I'll have them board Fireball immediately."

"Sure thing." Steve responded as the elevator doors slid closed.

Steve noticed Venus was carrying a box under her arm.

"Medical equipment?" he asked as the elevator descended.

"No", Venus smiled, showing him the box, "I was baby-sitting for the Zeros. This is my reward for looking after Jonathon Zero Junior for the evening."

Steve winced. "A dangerous mission uh? I wondered how you got here so fast."

"The Commander and his wife had just got back when Sergeant Mahoney was found." Venus frowned as she remembered the incident. "He was in bad shape Steve, but he'll be O.K."

Once outside, Steve and Venus wasted no time in getting to their jetmobiles.

"Ready Steve?" Venus asked as she climbed aboard.

"Ready Venus..."

"Right Steve, let's go..."

"Hold it. Here come our two passengers!"

Two burly security guards were escorting the protesting passengers in their direction.

"What's this about?" Mike Mercury demanded as he strode up to them. "You got us up in the middle of the night..."

"Quite so." Added Doctor Beaker, somewhat out of breath and still buttoning up his jacket. "Most unsatisfactory, if I might say so."

"Ok, we'll take them aboard." Steve told the guards, who seemed relieved to abandon their charges. "We're going for a ride gentlemen. Climb aboard."

Mike wasn't happy, "You woke us up in the middle of the night to ride pillion on these goofy motorbikes?"

Doctor Beaker was already climbing aboard Steve's jetmobile. "I say, this is most interesting."

"Steve's jetmobile rose a foot or so off the ground."

"Mr Mercury.... Please - we are in a hurry!" called Venus quietly but firmly.

"Anything for a weird life..." sighed Mike as he climbed up behind Venus.

"Hold tight" Venus called as the jetmobile began to lift.

"You betcha!" Mike replied, putting his arms around the girl, for once, happy to take orders.

"Er, pardon my asking Colonel, but are we a little, ah, high?"

"Only about a hundred feet Doctor."

"Oh dear...the ground does seem rather a long way down."

"Just keep looking forward Doctor - you'll soon see something to take your mind off the height..."

"Hey!" cried Mike Mercury when he saw where they were heading. "The spaceship? You're taking us...."

"For a ride." Grinned Venus as they headed over towards the massive spaceship.

"But why the middle of the...?"

"Please, Mr Mercury. We'll answer all your questions once we are aboard. Just enjoy the view for now."

A short while later Venus joined the two passengers in Fireball's spacious and comfortable lounge.

"Hello Doctor Venus." Mike greeted her getting to his feet, "Back in uniform I see. You looked great in the blue jeans."

"Oh...er thank you Mr Mercury. Yes, this trip was a surprise for me too." Venus said, settling down on the other sofa.

"Well," Mike grinned as he sat down again, "I see Venus and Mercury are in opposition."

Venus smiled at her two guests; "Blast away will be in a just a few minutes gentlemen..."

"Please extinguish your cigarettes..." Mike joked, "...and fasten your seat belts."

Venus laughed. "Well, you won't need to fasten seatbelts but I would advise you don't smoke - it annoys the pilot...."

"Indeed," remarked Beaker "and is, ahm, Colonel Zodiac the pilot?"

"Yes Doctor, he is."

"Anyone else boarding for this trip?" Mike asked.

"No, Professor Matic is already aboard and working out our course."

"And where, may I ask," Beaker enquired, "is our, ahm, destination?"

Venus looked suddenly more serious. "We don't know that yet. I'm afraid your Supercar machine has been stolen."

"What??!!" cried the two time travellers simultaneously.

"Stand by everyone..." came Steve Zodiac's voice over the lounge intercom speaker, "Blast Away in fifteen seconds."

Mike looked startled. "He's not giving us much time to get strapped in..."

Doctor Beaker nodded. "Er, yes indeed. Are we to use, hmm acceleration couches?"

Venus smiled, "Oh, please don't worry gentlemen." She stood and beckoned the two men over to the large lounge windows. "You should get a good view from here...."

Suddenly rocket engines roared into life.

Mike watched in awe as the building opposite began to slide slowly past the windows. He'd experienced this feeling many times whilst sitting in a train at a station. Seeing carriages begin to move and wondering if it were his train or the other train that was moving. Right now though, he wasn't sure if the ship or the building was moving. The scenery began to gather speed, beginning to hurry past, faster and faster.

"Remarkable!" exclaimed Beaker. "Quite.... remarkable."

More rocket engines suddenly fired and Mike suddenly felt off balance as the ground tilted at forty-five degrees and rapidly fell away.

"Superb!" Beaker exclaimed in utter amazement. "Simply superb!"

Blue sky filled the view for a short while, and then the blue grew darker, becoming black and stars shone brightly.

"Mr Mercury?"

Mike realised he'd grabbed Doctor Venus's arms for support. "Uh... Oh sorry..." He hurriedly released his grip.

"Oh that's all right." Venus grinned, "It can be a little overpowering the first time..."

"I'll say..." Mike agreed as he eagerly flopped back down on a couch. He wasn't sure why he felt weak at the knees, was it the launch or was it something else?

Venus leaned on the back of the sofa, glancing over at Doctor Beaker.

Beaker was still standing by the windows as if in a trance. "Amazing... amazing..."

"You were telling us our Supercar has been stolen." Mike said, feeling a little out of breath, "I'd say, who cares? With what you've got..."

"With what I've got?" Venus asked, an impish smile crossing her features as she looked down at him.

Mike Mercury, Test Pilot, suddenly found himself lost for words. This woman from the future - she was so aptly named... "Uh... I ...er... I mean you have all this technology..."

"Say, I could sure use a coffee..." Steve announced as he strode into the room.

"Well," Venus said brightly, "I'll just fix us all a coffee."

She reached out and pressed a stud on a small table and instantly a steaming coffeepot slid into place.

"Instant coffee - wow!" Mike exclaimed.

The aroma of fresh coffee wafted across the lounge. "Oh... I... Forgive me... I was so absorbed..." Doctor Beaker said, as he hurried over to sit himself down next to Mike again. "I, er, that is, may I have a cup of coffee too please Doctor?"

"Certainly Doctor Beaker." Venus passed Beaker the first cup.

"What did you think of the launch?" Steve asked as Venus handed out the remaining cups.

Beaker considered for a moment, gazing absently at his swirling coffee. Then he looked up, "Colonel Zodiac, I thought it was remarkable, quite remarkable."

"Say, I hope there's one for me," Matt called cheerfully, as he ambled into the lounge and plonked himself down on the sofa beside the two 'antiques'.

"Ah, who might I ask, is ah... piloting this vessel?" Beaker asked looking around at his hosts. "I thought there were only three of you aboard."

"Don't worry Doctor Beaker." Steve smiled, "Robert our robot co-pilot is looking after the ship."

He paused as Venus handed him a steaming cup of coffee. "Now, down to business. We think we know who took 'Supercar' and we are in pursuit. They have a head start - but our ship is much faster than theirs. We should catch up with them in a few hours."

Mike and Beaker exchanged glances.

"And just what is Fireball's speed at full power, Colonel?" Mike asked.

"I'm afraid we can't tell you that Mr Mercury." Steve was apologetic but firm. "We are under orders not to reveal too much about our technology."

"I understand" agreed Beaker.

"You do?" demanded Mike. "What have you got to hide Colonel? You can trust us to keep secrets."

"Mike..." began Beaker seriously, "If we took back knowledge from the future - to the past, it could, ah, change the future..."

"You mean we could invent space travel before it is invented and then none of this would be the same?"

"Precisely."

Matt nodded, "That's the problem right enough. Y'see, if you took back future knowledge - it could mean we don't even exist!"

"Matter of life and death uh?" Mike saw how serious his hosts were looking and decided to change the subject.

"But - does that mean you think we can go back - back to 1961?"

"Why sure," Matt told them, "I had it all figured."

"Had?" asked Mike.

Matt shrugged, "It all kinda depended on sending you back in that Supercar of yours. You see...."

"What goes up must come down?" prompted Mike.

"Not exactly, but I guess that's it, near enough. We have to return things to how they were - put you back in the exact place and time - or it won't work."

"So it's vital that we recover your Supercar." Steve added.

"What if we don't want to return to the past?" Mike asked. "What if we choose to stay here, in 2064?"

Beaker was shocked by the question, "Mike??"

Steve frowned, "Is this a hypothetical question?"

Mike felt suddenly self-conscious as all eyes were on him. "Maybe not just hypothetical, Colonel. I'd thought Doctor Beaker and I were stranded here - in the future. Now it seems we have a choice."

"There's no choice." Steve said firmly. "You have to go back to your own time period."

Beaker turned to address Mike, "My dear fellow, I think the Colonel is right. I'm no expert on time travel, mark you, but I suspect that the, ah, temporal continuum will not tolerate a discontinuity."

"Uh?" Now it was Mike's turn to frown.

"Doctor Beaker is right..." Matt confirmed, "My research on time travel indicates that Time is kind of elastic. That is, if the time stream is distorted it'll eventually snap back into its original form, if it can."

"And if it can't?" Mike asked feeling way out of his depth.

"Then it might 'fracture' or 'break'. If you don't go back to your own time period then this portion of reality - our current time frame and everything in it, will cease to exist."

"But we exist right now..." Mike argued, "So maybe Time won't 'fracture'."

"It could be..." Matt continued, "...that this means that the two of you do return to your own time - with Supercar. Cause and Effect are returned to their proper places in the space-time continuum."

"So we can't lose?" Mike asked, "It's a safe bet - We do find Supercar and we do go back to 1961."

"Nope. You see there's just a high probability, at the moment, that we'll succeed in sending you back. That's all it is - a probability factor. It's as if we're literally racing against Time. If we lose the race, we lose everything - and I mean everything."

Mike silently finished the last of his coffee, deep in thought.

Meanwhile a spaceship bearing the name SS Thor, was speeding ever deeper into an asteroid field.

"We are going too fast my love - we will hit an asteroid!"

"Be quiet Boris - there is no need to worry. Our auto pilot is programmed to avoid those rocks - and we are in a hurry."

"Do you still think Zodiac will be following us?"

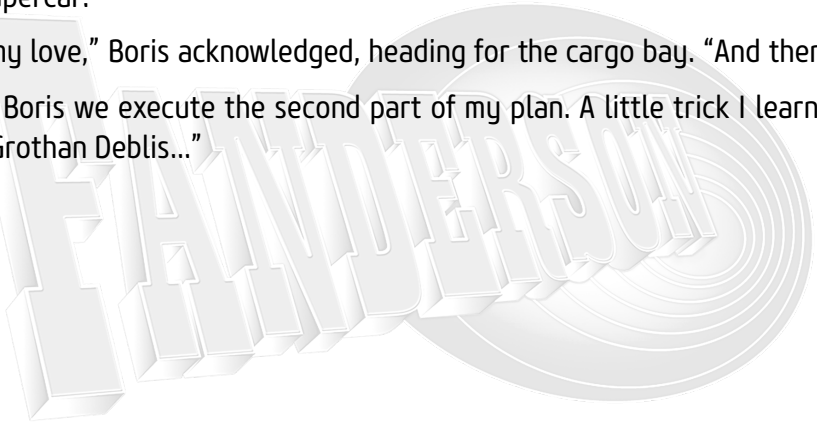
"Of course. Fireball XL5 was on the launch rail - he will be pursuing us - to his doom!" Grizelda chuckled at the thought. "Our own time machine - and an end to Steve Zodiac."

The SS Thor continued to move nimbly through the asteroids, which grew more numerous and ever larger. Soon the ship reached its destination, one of the largest asteroids. A hatch slid open and the ship slipped inside, the hatch quickly closing behind it.

"Ah - home sweet home!" beamed Grizelda, "Quickly Boris, we must unload the Supercar."

"Yes my love," Boris acknowledged, heading for the cargo bay. "And then?"

"Then Boris we execute the second part of my plan. A little trick I learned from Grothan Deblis..."



5

All Or Nothing

"We-e-elcome... ho-o-ome." Zoonie crooned lazily as Steve Zodiac stepped into Venus's lab.

"Say Venus... I didn't know Zoonie was aboard."

Venus was busy chopping an assortment of fresh fruit and vegetables. She looked up at Steve a little sheepishly. "Yes... You see Matt was looking after Zoonie on Fireball while I was baby-sitting Jonathan."

Steve grinned, "I don't know which would be worse! I take it that delicious looking meal is Zoonie's breakfast and not mine?"

"I'm afraid so Steve..." Venus said apologetically, "Zoonie doesn't like food pills. Do you Zoonie?"

Zoonie looked up at his mistress through half closed eyelids. After a moments careful consideration he replied, "Professor put the kettle on."

Steve smiled, but was suddenly more serious. "Listen Venus, we should be catching up with Boris's ship in about half an hour. Then we'll be seeing some action."

"Should I inform our passengers?"

"Yeah, they'd better be prepared - no telling what's going to happen. One things certain though. We have to get Supercar back in one piece - and Mercury and Beaker must make the trip back in time. We can't afford for anything to happen to them."

"I understand Steve. I'll just finish feeding Zoonie and then I'll go back to our guests. I asked them to stay in the lounge. I'll take them some food

pills." Venus reached up to a shelf and picked up two small jars. "Here's your breakfast Steve, the others are for Matt."

"How come Matt gets blue pills and mine are green?"

Venus grinned, "I'm afraid I've put the Professor on a diet,"

Steve swallowed his breakfast and headed for the door. "Delicious!" he told Venus. "Now I'll go deal with our spy friends."

As Steve left, Venus finished preparing Zoonie's breakfast. "Here you are Zoonie. Now eat it all up like a good boy." As she watched her pet happily eating his food, Venus found herself thinking of the two time travellers. They seemed so delighted to be out in space. She had always felt drawn to the stars, but Steve and Matt seemed to find it all rather routine most of the time. Mike and Beaker had been happily telling her tales about their adventures in Supercar. How similar to Steve and Matt this pilot and scientist were - and yet how very different. She was aware that Mike Mercury found her very attractive. Somehow Steve didn't seem to notice her that way. She found herself regretting that their mission was to send Mike back in time... and that somewhere back on Earth he was already dead and buried... Venus scolded herself for getting so emotional. "There Zoonie, all gone. Now, you be good while I go back to feed our visitors - I hope they like food pills..."

Mike Mercury and Doctor Beaker sat alone in Fireball's lounge staring out into the star filled blackness that lay just beyond the large windows.

"What do you make of all this Doc?"

"Make of it Mike?" Beaker said absently, "I'm afraid I don't entirely follow you."

"I mean do you buy this story that we have no choice about returning to 1961?"

Beaker turned and looked at his companion thoughtfully, "I suppose I don't have to buy their story Mike. I want very much to return home."

Mike got to his feet and began pacing the floor uneasily, as he marshalled his thoughts. "I'm not so sure I want to go back Doc."

"Hmmm."

"And just what was that supposed to mean?"

Beaker looked up at the test pilot, "Are you thinking of the girl, Doctor Venus by any chance?"

Mike became a little agitated, "What are you getting at Doctor?"

"Oh nothing Mike. " Beaker sighed. "I do not have a clue as to the merit of their scientific notions about time-travel. However, I do feel rather out of place here... or perhaps more accurately, out of time."

"Doc..." Mike said carefully, "...how would you feel about me staying here while you go back, back to the past?"

"I do accept one thing about time-travel Mike. We have to go back together if we are to, er, correct causal relationships within the er, space-time continuum."

"All or nothing uh?"

"And I personally," responded Beaker, his voice taking on a more serious tone, "would prefer 'all' rather than nothing. Don't forget Mike, if these people are right then 'nothing' is what we shall all become if our current time-frame is, er...er...un-existed."

"Hello gentlemen." Venus said softly as she entered the room.

"Uh...er...hello Doctor." Beaker mumbled, feeling a little conspiratorial.

"Hi, Doctor Venus" Mike said warmly. "We were just talking about you."

"Er...indirectly." Beaker added.

"Well I'm sorry to interrupt such an important topic of conversation..." Venus told them, "but we are soon going to be catching up with the criminals who stole the Supercar."

Steve Zodiac sat at the controls of his ship, his deft fingers making careful adjustments to the view screen. "Matt," he called over the intercom, "Looks like there are some asteroids up ahead."

Matt replied almost immediately, "Yeah. For some reason they didn't register on the long-range scanners. From the look of the trail we're following I'd say the Thor probably passed very close to them. I estimate we'll have visual contact with Thor in about ten minutes. Then what, Steve?"

"I guess we get within interceptor range and then I order them to heave to."

"We can't afford to damage Supercar Steve."

"I know Matt. I don't even dare use a blast missile to disable their ship... if Supercar takes damage we might be finished."

Matt suddenly sounded anxious, "Steve... I've lost the trail... I can't figure it."

"Lost them?" Steve asked. "But how??"

"The spacemograph was picking up their ion emissions clear as a bell, then it just faded out."

In the Navigation Bay Matt swung his circular desk around to lock into the auxiliary tracking computers. "Steve... Those asteroids are putting out a lot of radiation... My guess is it's interfering with the neutroni transceivers."

"Can you fix the problem?"

"Nope. But I reckon we should pick up the trail again on the other side, once we get clear of the er, emissions."

"Ok Matt. Give me a course around those asteroids. The sooner we pick up that trail again the better."

Aboard the SS Thor Boris watched his space scanners nervously. "Grizelda. The XL5 is gaining on us!!"

"Oh Boris," Grizelda sighed, "don't be such a tootie. Of course they are gaining on us. The XL5 is a much faster ship than this old rust bucket."

"Is this part of your plan?" Boris asked, wishing Grizelda had confided her plans to him.

"Yes Boris. Now, listen carefully. Soon we shall be landing on Enigmus. Zodiac will follow - and fall right into our little trap."

After only a few minutes Matt almost yelled into his intercom. "Steve! I've got 'em! I'm tracking the ship on the astrascope - I'll pipe it through to your console."

Steve watched the central display screen on the pilot's console as a blocky, cylindrical shape swirled into view.

"That's them all right Matt."

"Yeah...I was lucky to find them optically. Those asteroids are disrupting most of our detection equipment. Our neutroni radio's not gonna work, that's for sure."

"Guess that's why our spy friends chose this route, hoping they'd throw us off the scent. Where do you suppose they are heading?"

"I'd say they are making for the fifth planet in this system Steve. It's the er, only terrestrial planet. The other five are all gas giants."

"Do you think they've spotted us Matt?"

"They don't look to be in any kind of a hurry. Besides, what's jamming our communications and tracking systems is probably jamming theirs too."

"Ok Matt. Without a radio we can't order them to surrender, and if I fire a missile across their bows we might start something we can't stop. So, what's that planet like?"

"It's about the size of Mars. Rocky surface... no sign of bodies of water. Atmosphere and temperature range is pretty Earth-like. "

Back in Fireball's lounge, Venus and her two guests were listening intently to the conversation over the ship's intercom.

Doctor Beaker could barely contain his excitement. "Another world! Is it possible that we may, ah, land there?"

Venus nodded. "I think that's very likely Doctor Beaker."

"This is some trip!" Mike said eagerly.

"If only I'd brought my camera..." Beaker sighed.

As Fireball XL5 followed the space spies, it soon became obvious that they were indeed heading for the fifth planet. Steve could see it clearly now. It was a striking emerald green in colour, like a bright gemstone glittering in space. He watched his central viewer as the SS Thor entered the planet's atmosphere.

"There they go Matt. Down to the night side of the planet..."

"I'm tracking their descent Steve, I'll have a fix on their co-ordinates when they land."

A few minutes later, Steve's voice echoed through the ship. "Ok everybody. Commencing standard landing procedures. Stand by for touchdown..."

Fireball XL5's landing jets flared brightly as the great ship slowly descended to the rocky surface of the planet on a column of thick white smoke.



6

The Tides Of Enigma

Steve Zodiac gazed warily out of the control cabin windows into the darkness beyond. He'd brought Fireball down behind a craggy outcrop of rock, nearly a mile from where Matt had pinpointed the S.S. Thor.

The doors slid open as Matt entered. "Nice landing Steve."

"Thanks Matt. I'd guess with all that radio interference our spy friends won't know we're here."

"What's the plan Steve?" Venus called over the intercom.

"It'll be dawn in about twenty minutes. Matt and I will head out to Boris' ship under cover of darkness. Venus, I want you to stay on the ship and look after the passengers."

Matt frowned as he looked out at the barren landscape. "Jetmobiles?"

"No Matt. We'll use thruster packs. I want to approach that ship as quietly as possible, We'll keep low and use the rocks as cover."

Venus was already waiting in the Ejection Room when Steve and Matt entered. She helped them strap on and check their thruster packs.

Steve opened a weapons locker. "Grab a raygun Matt, and we'll go take care of the space spies. Venus, I want you to stay in the ship until we get back. We can't use the radios. If we are not back in an hour I want you to get Fireball into orbit."

"But Steve..."

"If we don't come back in an hour we've hit a problem. I'd be happier if you and the others were out of harms way. Boris won't dare take on Fireball if she's in space."

"Ok Steve. One hour. How long should I stay in orbit?"

"Give us a further four hours - you can keep an eye on the area with the astrascope - Matt's locked it on to these co-ordinates. We'll signal... somehow."

"And if you don't signal?"

"Then I want you to head back for Earth at full boost."

"I...I understand Steve." Venus answered reluctantly.

"There's always a chance we were wrong about needing to send Supercar back, and I want you and the others safe from harm. Once you are clear of the neutroni interference, call up Commander Zero at Space City, he'll know what to do."

"Don't worry Venus," Matt said firmly. "We'll be okay."

Steve wished he shared Matt's confidence, but he felt a grim foreboding that there was some grave danger waiting for them. He forced himself to smile. "Yeah, we'll be ok. "

Soon Steve and the Professor emerged from Fireball's ejection tube. Using their thruster packs they flew low over the bleak rocky landscape. The two men made regular swimming motions with their legs to deftly control their velocity and altitude. Visibility was low so they kept their speed down. Some of those rocks looked pretty jagged.

Venus felt uneasy as she made her way back to the ship's lounge. Something felt horribly wrong. She scolded herself for being foolish. Danger was part of the job, part of their lives.

Mike looked up as she entered. "They're on their way?"

"Yes..." Mike could see that Venus was worried. "Do you think they'll have trouble?"

Venus sighed. "I don't know. We've dealt with these spies before, they are ruthless people."

"Sounds like our friend Masterspy" Mike said.

"Most certainly," agreed Beaker, "Masterspy is, er was, a rather nasty piece of work."

"I wish I could have helped," Mike said earnestly. "I guess rounding up spies is in my line of work too." He found himself looking deep into Venus's eyes. "I guess your boyfriend must worry about you when you're far out in space."

"Boyfriend?" Venus asked absently.

"Your husband then?" Mike suggested.

"Oh, no Mister Mercury, I'm not married."

"Me neither." Mike grinned. "In fact, I don't have a real reason for going back to the past."

Venus felt strangely drawn to this man she barely knew. She forced herself to be professional. "But you do have to go back..."

Beaker said nothing, but he was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the direction the discussion was now taking.

Mike stood up and walked over to the windows. He gazed out into the dark alien landscape. "Yes. I know. Cause and effect and all that. I'm just saying, that given the choice, I think I'd stay here - in the future."

Somewhat pensively, Venus followed Mike over to the windows. She stood beside him, staring out at the same lonely picture. "But Mi... Mr Mercury. I don't understand. You know so little about our world, our time, and yet you want to stay?"

Mike turned to look at Venus. "Yeah... I suppose that sounds kinda 'tootie' as you people say. I guess I feel like a stranger in Paradise."

"But you've really seen very little."

"I've seen enough to make me want to see more. Especially more of..."

Doctor Beaker decided it was polite to leave at this point, he had no wish to intrude on an obviously very personal conversation. He quietly made his way to the door, which slid silently open. Once out in the corridor he breathed a sigh of relief. Mike was, in his opinion, behaving most strangely. This whole situation was most unsatisfactory.

A pink tinge along the horizon heralded the approach of an alien dawn, creating an eerie twilight effect.

"There's the ship Matt." Steve pointed to a dark silhouette ahead of them. "Keep your eyes peeled and your raygun ready."

Soon the two men were crouching behind rocks not far from the Thor's main hatch.

"Steve!" whispered Matt urgently. "What do you make of that??"

The Professor was pointing to one of the ship's landing legs. The pad was a foot or so above the ground.

"Freefloat..." Steve said quietly. "I don't like this....C'mon let's blast our way inside!"

A shout from behind caused the two men to freeze. "Drop your weapons!" Boris demanded.

Steve and Matt turned their heads to see Boris was also using a thruster pack - and was pointing a lethal looking rifle at them. He moved towards them, gliding several feet above the ground.

The ship's hatch slid open and Grizelda appeared, raygun in hand. "You will also remove your thruster packs."

"Do it." Steve told Matt as he tossed his gun aside and began removing his thruster pack.

"What now?" Matt whispered as he dropped his gun.

"Just wait for the right moment Matt..."

"Now." Boris called, "Toss those jet packs over to your right."

The two thruster packs thudded into the sand.

"Do not move a muscle - either of you. This gun has no stun setting."

"Nice work Boris." Grizelda chuckled. "I will cover them. Get back to the ship."

Steve stared coldly at Grizelda. "We've come for the Supercar you stole."

"But of course my dear Colonel." Grizelda cast a glance towards the rising sun as Boris landed by her side. "However, I am afraid that we don't have it - do we Boris?"

Boris smiled smugly. "No Grizelda. It's not here Zodiac. But we are pleased that you decided to pay us a visit."

"There's no time for games Boris." Steve said firmly. "You have to return the Supercar to us."

"My dear Colonel," said Boris evenly, "you are in no position to make demands. We have your time-machine and now we will also have its inventors."

"But there is no time-machine...." Matt protested.

Grizelda laughed. "Of course not Professor. You would pursue us all this way just to recover a stolen air car." She smiled. "Have you noticed it's a little warmer?"

Steve glared back at her. "The sun is coming up. What of it?"

"You will soon find out. Come closer, Colonel."

Steve tried to move his leg. His boot was held fast. Looking down he saw that his boot was encrusted with green sand... or perhaps it wasn't sand.

"You appear to be stuck Colonel" Grizelda jeered.

Matt was also finding that he was held fast. "Steve! We're sinking into the rock!"

Boris lowered his rifle. "Oh do not worry my friends. You are not sinking...The ground you are standing on is simply expanding..."

Grizelda holstered her raygun and smiled broadly. "As the sun rises you will find that the rocks expand even faster. It is like a tide. The rocks rise and fall with the passing of the sun overhead. You are fortunate enough to be standing in a shady spot...it will be several hours before you are completely...engulfed."

"Boris!" Steve shouted as the two space spies turned to go back inside their ship. "You've got to listen to me. We are all in great danger!"

"Not from where I'm standing Zodiac." Boris laughed as he and Grizelda disappeared from view, the outer hatch closing behind them.

Beaker paced the corridor outside XL5's lounge, deep in thought. He was startled when he almost bumped into Zoonie. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" he apologised, stepping back abruptly. "You are the er...lazon...." Beaker reminded himself that Zoonie was Venus's pet and a kind of space monkey

by all accounts. "It's rather a pity that you can't meet Mitch. He's a monkey, you know."

"Howdy folks..." Zoonie yawned.

"I must say though, you are the first talking monkey that I've ever encountered."

"Follow meeee." Zoonie crooned, pleased with the attention he was receiving from his new friend. He turned and padded quietly along the corridor and down a small flight of steps. "Follow....meeee." he called hopefully, gazing back up at Doctor Beaker and waving his large paws in the air.

"My dear fellow..." Beaker began, then shrugged. "Lead on McDuff" he smiled, following the lazoon into the lower corridor. Turning a corner Doctor Beaker found he was looking at a large curved door. Set into the door was a small circular window. As he peered through the glass, Beaker could see a strange, alien landscape, now dimly illuminated by the first light of dawn. He could see pale green hills standing out sharply from a darker green plain.

"My goodness...." Beaker breathed. "Another world...the other side of this door."

Zoonie clasped his paws behind his back, regarding Doctor Beaker with intense curiosity. Beaker's right hand was absently moving over buttons beside the door.

"If only I could take a few steps outside..." he muttered softly. He toyed with the idea of attempting to open the door, but reasoned that this would be both unethical and possibly beyond his ability. He was aware that he had been trusted to respect the wishes of his hosts and remain on the ship. He was also conscious of the fact that he had no idea how to safely operate this rather alien door mechanism. He drummed his fingers on the door thoughtfully and then with a sigh, returned his attention to Zoonie.

Zoonie ambled over to the door and reaching up to the control panel, began pressing buttons.

“Er...no...er...Lazoon. “ Beaker said in dismay. “I don’t believe that would be wise.”

Unsure of what he should do he placed a hand on Zoonie’s arm with the intention of gently pulling the lazoon away. But he was too late. Almost silently, the door began to slide aside and Beaker felt a sudden cold, but not entirely unpleasant breeze on his face.

“Follow me.... Follow me...” Zoonie chimed as he stepped through the open doorway.

“Er...wait old chap....” But Zoonie was gone.

“Oh dear....” Beaker muttered as he watched Zoonie scamper down a flight of metal steps and onto the green surface beyond.

Beaker was unsure of how one should address an errant lazoon, but he felt he’d best make some effort to encourage the animal back aboard the ship.

“Lazoon! Lazoon come back this instant...”

Zoonie looked up and blinked, “Professor...professor....”

Beaker gingerly made his way down the steps to the green surface below.

Zoonie was clambering over rocks a few yards away.

“One small step....” Beaker told himself as he prepared to place a foot onto the green, alien sands.

Standing beside the panoramic windows in Fireball’s lounge, Venus and Mike were still deep in conversation.

"But you don't understand." Venus protested. "It wouldn't work. It couldn't work".

"We could make it work!" Mike insisted, taking her hands in his. "If..." "Look!" Venus exclaimed, suddenly pulling her hands free and pointing to the window. "There's somebody out there!"



7

Gripping Stuff

Doctor Horatio Beaker sat on the edge of a rocky shelf not far from Fireball's steps. Zoonie was happily playing in the green sand at his feet, but Beaker was fully absorbed in watching an alien sun climbing up into the pale grey sky. Shadows were slowly yielding to the advancing sunlight.

He calculated that this world turned slowly on it's axis at a rate roughly comparable to Earth's Moon. The sun would remain in the sky for perhaps a week. The sun was, Beaker judged, a main sequence star of type G, similar to Earth's sun. He reached into his coat pocket and brought out a notebook and pencil. "Now, if theta is equal to..."

"Doctor Beaker!" a distant voice called. Beaker paid the voice no attention; he was totally absorbed in his calculations.

Doctor Venus stood in the spaceship's open hatchway. She was becoming impatient. "Doctor Beaker! Please get back inside the ship!"

Totally immersed in thought, Beaker continued making his observations.

Zoonie however, had noted Venus's displeased tone and was soon scampering back up XLS's steps.

"This is...quite, quite, remarkable!" Beaker muttered as he continued to scribble down notes and calculations. "Ah that's better, it's getting a lot brighter now...."

"Doc!" Mike called impatiently. "You gave us a scare." Seeing that Beaker was paying no attention whatsoever, he turned to Venus. "Don't worry, I'll get him."

Mike hurried down the steps and across the rocks to where Beaker was sitting. "C'mon Doc, it might be dangerous out here."

"Nonsense!" Beaker asserted without looking up. "This is another world Mike... Another world..."

"Back on the bus." Mike insisted firmly as he reached out his hand. "Play later... Or teacher will be annoyed with us."

"Oh very well." Beaker sighed wistfully, as he pocketed his notebook. He took Mike's proffered hand. As he got to his feet he almost fell, but Mike held him steady.

"Doc! Are you ok?"

"Er... yes Mike... However, I appear to be....ahm.... stuck."

Mike looked down at the green sand at Beaker's feet. "Quicksand?" He muttered, taking both of Beaker's arms and trying to haul him back up onto the rocks. But Beaker didn't budge.

"What's wrong?" Venus asked anxiously as she made her way over to the two men.

"I don't know" Mike grunted. "He's stuck fast in that green stuff."

Venus could see that green sand was slowly creeping up the sides of Beaker's shoes.

"Doctor!" she ordered, "Unfasten your shoes - quickly!"

Beaker hurriedly complied and was shocked to see the sand inexorably moving upwards. "My word!"

"Get his arm over your shoulders..." Venus said quickly. "I'll take the other - don't let his feet touch the sand."

With some effort Mike and Venus managed to pull Beaker free and swung him back onto solid ground, leaving his shoes firmly embedded in the green sand.

"Thank you..." Beaker said gratefully, mopping his brow with a handkerchief, "I must confess I was beginning to feel somewhat nervous. That, er, sand has amazing powers of adhesion."

Mike knelt on the rocks and reached out for Beaker's shoes - and withdrew his hand abruptly. Green sand was oozing up their sides like a living mass and flowing into them. Seconds later there was no trace of the shoes, just a smooth layer of sand - that was steadily rising.

Mike felt a hand on his shoulder. "Back to the ship - now!" Venus commanded, pushing both of the men back towards the open hatchway.

"Hurry!" she called urgently as Mike helped Beaker up the steps. Behind them Venus watched in horror as the green sand began to ooze over the rocks towards her. She raced up the steps and into the ship. Mike helped her inside and she quickly retracted the steps and closed the hatch.

"What was that green stuff??" Mike asked as Venus leaned on the bulkhead regaining her breath.

"I don't... know. But I've got to get Fireball off these rocks. Come with me, both of you!"

Venus raced down XL5's corridors. "Got to get to the control cabin!"

Mike and Doctor Beaker tried their best to keep up but Beaker's lack of shoes slowed them down.

"I rather fear, " Beaker protested, "that I'm getting too old for this kind of activity..."

"I'm over a hundred years old too Doc," Mike told him. "Just keep going, we must be nearly there now."

Venus burst onto Fireball's flight deck with the others not far behind. "Robert!" Venus ordered as she flung herself into the pilot's seat. "Emergency lift off!"

"Emergency lift off." Robert acknowledged immediately. He reached out a clawed hand and activated Fireball's vertical take-off motors.

The ship lurched as Mike and Doctor Beaker rushed into the control cabin, almost throwing them off their feet.

"We're not moving!" Venus exclaimed in frustration. "Robert, full power."

Robert acknowledged the order and the engines screamed with power but the ship refused to lift off.

Mike and Beaker looked around the control cabin in awe. Ahead through the glass canopy they saw a spectacular view of the alien landscape, but it was Robert who captured their attention. "Mike..." whispered Beaker. "The Robot!"

Venus was looking anxiously at the dials in front of her. "The engines are overheating. Cut power Robert."

"Cut power." Robert repeated and the engines rapidly fell silent.

Venus looked back at her companions, clearly worried. "I'll have to go outside to see what's wrong."

Mike put a hand on her shoulder. "Out there? I'll come with you."

Venus ran her hands across her face as she stood up, brushing back her blonde hair. "No Mister Mercury. She smiled briefly. "But thank you. I'll have to use a thruster pack."

Mike and Beaker followed as Venus stepped out of the control cabin and made her way to the jetmobile bay. "Don't worry. If I can't free the ship we'll be able to leave in Fireball Junior."

"Fireball Junior?" Beaker asked as Venus pulled a thruster pack from a locker in the wall.

"Yes Doctor Beaker. This is Fireball Junior. It's the nosecone of the ship. It can fly independently." Venus pressed some buttons on a wall panel, and a huge door began to open in the roof of the ship. Mike felt suddenly very homesick for the Black Rock Lab and the roof door which slid back for him to launch Supercar. It all seemed so long ago. He felt a lump in his throat as he reminded himself it was a long time ago... a century had gone by."

"Okay." Venus said once she'd put on her thruster pack. "Please wait in the control cabin. I shouldn't be very long."

"Be careful." Mike told her.

"And good luck Doctor!" Beaker added. He'd never seen anything like that sand before and he didn't like to imagine what other horrors might be lurking outside.

Venus smiled back at her two companions as her thruster pack hissed and carried her smoothly up into the air and out through the open hatch.

"Up, up and away!" Mike exclaimed as he watched her go.

"Amazing!" Beaker applauded. "Simply amazing."

Mike stared up at the sky above them. "I should have gone with her Doc."

"Mike, do you really imagine that you could have operated one of those flying devices?"

"No. I guess not."

"That apparatus is extremely advanced, not only in terms of capability. I could discern no visible controls on that, ahm, thruster pack."

Mike was surprised that he hadn't noticed that fact himself. All he remembered seeing was a beautiful golden haired woman ascending into the sky like an angel. He grinned. "All done with wires I guess. I'm sure

Doctor Venus can handle things. She's an astronaut and I'm only a pilot, I just feel so useless here."

"Quite so Pilot, quite so. I suggest we return to the control cabin as ordered, and employ our combined skills to deduce something about those control mechanisms and thus learn something of this incredible spacecraft's, ahmm, underlying principles."

Venus was soon flying high above Fireball, striving to get an overall picture of the situation. The cold grey light of this world's dawn afforded poor visibility. She stared down at the panorama below. Fireball XL5 nestled beside a ridge of high peaks. The rough craggy landscape had been transformed into a smooth green carpet with odd outcroppings of greyish rock jutting out here and there like islands in a placid sea. From this height she couldn't make out any movement on the green surface.

If only Steve and Matt would return. She tried not to imagine what might have become of them. Her first task was to ensure the safety of her passengers. Carefully she swooped down beside the massive spaceship, keeping some twenty feet above the ground. She was horrified to see that the landing gear was almost completely buried in the rock. Making smooth kicking motions with her legs, Venus made her way back along the ship towards the wings. She could soon see that the massive wing pods were already partly submerged in the strange creeping rock. She landed gently on Fireball's port wing. Looking back towards the nose of the ship she could see that Junior's stabiliser fins were still well clear of the ground. She'd have to use Junior as a lifeboat; it was her only option.

A sudden sound made her turn her head, the roar of rocket engines! Looking towards the nearby rocky cliffs she realised that the S.S. Thor must have taken off, and it was rapidly approaching. Had Steve and Matt captured the ship? She had no way of knowing since the radios weren't working.

She felt a tremble of excitement. Were Steve and Matt returning? As the noise grew much louder, the Thor suddenly appeared above the cliff face. Then the motors cut and the craft hung there, motionless, it's anti-gravity generators keeping it suspended in freefloat.

With the noise of the engines still ringing in her ears, Venus was startled as she felt something hard and cold pressing into the back of her neck.

"You will make no false moves Doctor..." a harsh voice declared from behind. "Unless you wish me to blow your head off..."

Less than a mile away, Steve and Matt had watched helplessly as the Thor had lifted into the sky leaving them to their fate. But it was the fate of Venus and her charges that worried the two men the most.

The strange green tide had already risen to cover their knees and seemed to be rising faster as the sun climbed lazily into the sky.

"We've gotta stop them Matt!"

"Yeah Steve, but how?" Matt tried in vain to free his legs. "This stuff might look like sand, but it's hard as rock once it sets."

Steve desperately tried to focus his thoughts. If they failed their mission, and Supercar and it's passengers were not returned to their proper time, then whole planetary populations might suddenly cease to be - including all the people he'd ever known. But a part of his mind could only think of Venus and her immediate danger at the hands of two ruthless criminals.

"Steve..." Matt said as calmly as he could, "I think we've had it this time."

“Never say die, Matt.” Steve told him, sounding a good deal more confident than he actually felt. “We have to figure a way out. What do you make of this stuff?”

Matt stared down at the sand that bubbled around his legs. “Some kind of rock I guess. As the sun heats it, granules form. The granules take up more space, so the level rises. The granules begin to fuse together after a short time and then finer grains form on the exposed surface and the process keeps repeating. It’s like the phase shift of solid to liquid due to heating.”

Steve turned to look at the sun, still sitting just above the horizon. “Maybe once the sun goes down the green stuff will recede again.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure it will. But Steve, a day here is gonna be about nine Earth days.”

“I’d estimate we have about two hours, maybe less...before this stuff chokes us.”

Matt shook his head. “I reckon less. Once that stuff gets up to our chests we’re sure gonna find it hard to breathe. That sand, or whatever it is, will cling tighter than a Herbosian python.”

“We’d better take oxygen pills while we still can Matt. They may help.”

“Yeah, good idea. But I don’t think they’ll do any good... If our chests are paralysed.”

“It might work Matt.”

“Yeah...Well, I guess I’ll let you know. I’m a mite shorter than you are...”

8

Come Into My Parlour...

In Fireball XL5's control cabin, Mike Mercury and Doctor Beaker had heard the thunderous approach of the Thor. Like Doctor Venus, they hoped that Steve Zodiac had successfully captured the space criminals. The deafening roar of rocket engines had abruptly ceased and all was quiet.

Mike sighed as he gave up trying to see anything from the cabin windows. "I guess they landed somewhere close by."

"Quite so." Beaker agreed whilst thoughtfully scrutinising his sketch of the robot co-pilot. He snapped his notebook closed and returned it to an inside coat pocket. "I imagine they must have landed, ah, aft of this ship."

Mike began to feel more and more uneasy as the minutes ticked by. "What's keeping Zodiac? And where's Doctor Venus?"

Doctor Beaker carefully sat himself down in the pilot's seat. "Since we're firmly stuck Mike, perhaps Colonel Zodiac is intending to haul us out of our predicament with the other ship."

"Maybe." Mike sighed, "But I don't like this situation. Suppose something has happened to Doctor Venus. We don't know that was Zodiac flying that other ship..."

"Mike, I am sure that Doctor Venus would have heard that confounded rocket approaching. It was quite deafening."

All of a sudden another sound made both men turn their heads. Robert had fallen forwards in the co-pilots seat and the robot now lay sprawled over the controls. The cockpit doors slid open and a silver suited figure stood in the doorway, a raygun held menacingly in his hand. "I am afraid it is an old ship, and a very noisy one."

Mike glared at the gunman. "Mister Space Spy I presume?"

Boris ignored the remark as he strode confidently onto the flight deck. He glanced briefly at the robot he'd just de-activated and smiled with satisfaction. "So... We meet at last gentlemen." He waved the gun. "Put up your hands, both of you and stand over there."

Mike slowly raised his hands, but his tone was one of defiance. "Where is Doctor Venus?" he demanded. "If you've harmed her..."

Boris chuckled. "Please save your worthless threats. Your lady friend is being dealt with."

The space spy quickly checked his two captives to see if they were armed. Finding Beaker's notebook he gave it a quick glance and then pocketed the item.

"My dear fellow!" Beaker protested indignantly.

"Not now Doc." Mike hissed, fearing for the Doctor's safety.

Satisfied that they weren't carrying weapons, Boris ushered Mike and Beaker out of the control cabin. "Now, you will both do exactly as I tell you. You are being...rescued."

"Look above you" he ordered as they stepped into the jetmobile bay.

The open hatch in the ceiling framed a pale grey alien sky. Something was slowly moving downwards towards them, blotting out the daylight. Something large. Something ugly.

"Our spaceship." Boris told them as a rope ladder descended in front of them. "You will climb the ladder and board it. It is your only chance of survival."

"If we're being rescued..." Mike said angrily "...Why the gun?"

"Simply to ensure your full and immediate co-operation. We are running out of time. Boris pushed Beaker forwards with his free hand. "You first, Doctor Beaker."

Beaker grasped the ladder with both hands, looking up nervously at the dark shape, which floated soundlessly in the sky above. As he started to climb the ladder his shoeless feet slipped on the smooth metal rungs and he cried out in pain and annoyance.

Boris cursed loudly.

Seizing his chance, Mike hurled himself at the spy, sending the raygun spinning from his hand as both men crashed heavily to the deck.

Boris angrily lashed out with his booted feet, sending Mike sprawling backwards over a jetmobile. Partially dazed, Mike managed to scramble to his feet just as Boris reached him. Mike slammed his fist into Boris's jaw with a loud smack. Boris stumbled back against the bulkhead and slid to the deck, out for the count.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Beaker exclaimed excitedly.

Mike didn't reply. He was searching for the fallen raygun. His keen eyes quickly found it and he stooped to grab it.

"Mike! Look out!" Beaker called.

But Mike didn't turn quickly enough to see Grizelda jump down from the ladder, or to avoid her raygun as it struck the back of his head. Pain and a sudden blackness overwhelmed him. He fell to the floor, unconscious.

Time passed. Mike slowly became aware of a dull pain in his head as he fought to open his eyes. "Doctor...Venus?" he asked weakly as he blinked at a girl's face close to his, her eyes filled with concern.

"Yes Mike, it's me. Please don't try to move. Just lie still."

Mike felt his eyes close again and his mind drifted back into nothingness. A sharp pain in his right arm made him open his eyes again. He now realized he was lying on the floor, his head resting against Venus's shoulder as she knelt beside him.

"Guess I passed out..." he said as his eyes began to focus more. "Where are we?"

"You were struck on the head with a raygun. We're prisoners I'm afraid - in the criminals spacecraft."

Mike started to get to his feet and Venus helped him to stand. "You should be ok in a few minutes, I've given you a shot to speed your recovery."

"Thanks Doctor. How long have I been out?" Mike asked, gingerly touching the back of his head.

"About an hour. You've been drifting in and out of consciousness."

Mike leaned against a wall as his memory flooded back. "Doctor Beaker. What happened to the Doc?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. Boris brought you along to my prison cell. I think they must be interrogating Doctor Beaker. They are obsessed with the idea that Supercar is a time machine."

Mike stared around their prison. He'd wished he could spend some time alone with Doctor Venus, but this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind. The cell was bare except for a small table and a couple of chairs. He shook the metal bars on the door in frustration. "We have to get out of here.... We've got to rescue Doctor Beaker."

"I know." Venus said quietly, trying to fight the feeling of despair that was welling up inside her. "And we have to save Steve and Matt too."

"Do you know what's happened to them?"

"Grizelda said they'd been 'taken care of' which could mean...anything."

"I'm afraid I'm no good at bending iron bars..." Mike admitted giving the door one last shake. "And I don't carry explosives with me just in case I might need them for a jail break.... Maybe I could pick the lock?"

Venus shook her head. "It's electronic, like the one on Fireball's jail cell. It's tamper proof."

Mike walked over to the small table and sat down wearily. "There must be something we can do to escape."

Venus drew up the other chair and sat beside him, "Well, once someone escaped from Fireball's jail...." she said thoughtfully.

"Oh, how'd they do that?"

"I was bringing the prisoner some food.... He attacked me and tied me up."

"Oh that old number...." Mike mused. "I guess it might work - especially as there are two of us."

"I was unarmed... But these people carry guns."

"I think it's our only chance to help the others Doctor.... Shall we give it a try?"

"Yes, all right Mister Mercury."

"Ok, assuming they do feed us sometime... I'll hide beside the door...When they come in, I'll grab their gun. I just hope we get to Beaker before it's too late."

"Yes, " Venus agreed, "They are desperate criminals who will stop at nothing..."

"More wine Doctor Beaker?" Grizelda smiled solicitously, seeing the Doctor's glass was empty.

"Oh, yes indeed. That would be most kind... most kind."

"I am so glad that you like my home cooking, Doctor."

"Oh, most definitely. This stroganoff is superb...er..."

"Oh please Doctor, you must call me Grizelda."

"Well, ah... Grizelda, I must admit that I am rather surprised by your hospitality. I was led to believe..."

"Ah! Grizelda smiled knowingly. "I understand. I am sure Colonel Zodiac and his friends told a good story about Boris and I."

"As a matter of fact, they said very little. Just that you were dangerous criminals and that you had stolen Supercar."

"Did you hear that Boris?" Grizelda chuckled to her husband.

"Ha ha ha." Boris laughed, "Yes, so we are 'dangerous criminals'!"

"But you did...ah...steal Supercar?" Beaker asked cautiously.

"Not exactly Doctor Beaker. Boris and I learned of the Supercar and that it was being held by the accursed World Space Patrol. We could not allow such a device to rest in the hands of these evil people. We liberated the time machine - for the greater good of the Free Universe."

"We did?" Boris spluttered on his drink, "I mean, that is correct. We did!"

"Er..." Beaker asked "...Accursed? Evil?"

"Why yes Doctor. Tell me, how much do you know of the World Space Patrol?"

"Frankly, ah Grizelda, absolutely nothing. They refuse to answer our questions."

Grizelda nodded gravely, "So, it is a good thing that we rescued you, your lives were in great danger."

"I must admit, my ah colleague Mister Mercury was expressing some doubts as to the truth of the matter...."

"Really?" Grizelda asked.

"Ah, yes, most certainly. He felt that they were, ah being economical with the truth as it were."

"I am sorry I had to detain Mr Mercury in our guest quarters Doctor. I hope you understand that it was for his own safety. I assure you that he will not be harmed."

"Oh yes, quite so. Quite so. Mike can be a little, er impetuous."

Boris ruefully rubbed his bruised chin. "Your colleague - he is also a scientist?"

"Oh heavens no. Mike is Supercar's ah, test pilot."

"Then," Grizelda asked thoughtfully as she sipped her wine "he is not a scientific genius like yourself?"

"Oh no. He's more an action sort of fellow."

"That is most interesting, is it not Boris? If you will excuse me a moment Doctor I will take Mister Mercury and his lady friend, Doctor Venus some food."

"Do tell them I am perfectly happy and that I'll see them shortly."

"Of course Doctor Beaker. No, please do not get up. Boris, the Doctor's glass is nearly empty."

Boris hurried to refill Beaker's glass as Grizelda left the room.

Soon Mike and Venus heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Now or never...." whispered Mike, quickly moving as far out of sight from the door as he could.

"And how are our guests settling in?" Grizelda greeted them as she approached.

"I hope you are enjoying your stay"

Venus clenched her fists tightly in anger. "What have you done to Doctor Beaker?" she demanded.

Grizelda carried a small metal tray in one hand and a raygun in the other.

"He is unharmed... for now. Boris and I are finding his conversation most... satisfactory."

She laughed as she approached the cell door. "Why Doctor Venus, I see your new boyfriend is rather shy. Is he hiding? I do hope I didn't interrupt anything intimate." She pulled open a small panel beside the door and pushed the tray inside. "Your food. I'm sure that you two love birds won't mind sharing a glass." She chuckled, slamming the hatch closed again. "Bon appetite." Still laughing, she disappeared down the corridor.

Mike sheepishly emerged from his hiding place. "Guess that didn't work out too well..." he said apologetically.

"No...." Venus sighed. "I suggest we eat our meal."

"What did she bring?" Mike asked as Venus carried the tray back to the table.

"Two food pills." Venus told him as she sat at the table. "And a small glass of water."

Mike sat down and picked up a food pill. "Oh good. I like these pink ones."

"Let's eat our meal and try not to worry. Please drink as much as you like Mister Mercury, I'm not thirsty."

"I think you'd better take a drink all the same...no telling how long we'll be here." Mike said pushing the glass towards Venus. "Since we're cell mates, Doctor, how's about you call me Mike?"

Venus smiled, resting her chin on her hands. "Ok, Mike. And please call me Venus."

"Venus? Don't I get a first name?"

"Venus is my first name, Mike."

"Venus Venus?" Mike raised his eyebrows.

"No...Just plain Venus I'm afraid." Venus swallowed her food pill and took a sip of water from the glass.

"There's nothing plain about you... Venus."



9

Cutting Edge

On the night side of Planet Enigmus, the SS Thor was resting silently on the rocky surface, safe from the tidal effects created by the rays of the planet's sun.

Boris had cleared away the empty plates from the galley table and he and Doctor Beaker now sat awaiting Grizelda's return.

"I was forgetting Doctor." Boris said apologetically. "I must return your notebook. He pushed the book across the table to Beaker, who seized it with visible relief. "Thank you, er, Boris."

"I hope you will forgive my professional curiosity, but I see you have an interest in robotics and the control systems of spacecraft?"

Beaker nodded. "Indeed. I find all this technology quite fascinating. As a scientist I am naturally intrigued as to the, ah, workings of such things."

"I am sure that Grizelda and I can supply you with any documents you desire which will facilitate your understanding of our modern day technology."

"Really?" Beaker said, his mouth almost watering.

"Of course Doctor. Information..." Boris said as he reached for a box of cigars, "...Is our business. For example, we know that you are from the Earth year nineteen hundred and sixty one." Boris opened the box, turning it towards Beaker. "A cigar, Doctor Beaker?"

"Er, no thank you. Most kind."

Boris smiled and selected a cigar for himself, closing the box with a snap that almost made Beaker jump. "A most primitive time, if I may say so Doctor," Boris continued, as he carefully cut and lit his cigar. "At that point in history, the Russians had not yet made their first trip to Earth's Moon."

"Er no. Indeed not." Beaker nodded thoughtfully.

Grizelda coughed loudly as she opened the galley door.

"Really Boris, if you must smoke those foul smelling things, open a hatch."

"Yes of course, my dear." Boris reached out and pressed a stud on the wall. A panel slid aside, revealing a velvet sky glittering with stars.

Grizelda waved a hand to clear some of the smoke. "Thank you Boris."

"And how are our two other guests Grizelda?" Boris asked, puffing contentedly on his cigar.

"Oh they are happy enough." Grizelda beamed, "They were playing hide and seek. Isn't that so romantic? I left them a nice snack."

Doctor Beaker's eyes quivered slightly as he pictured the scene that Grizelda had conjured in his mind.

"I must say I had noticed that Mike had established a certain, ah, rapport with Doctor Venus."

"How very astute of you, Doctor Beaker. I can tell you are a man of the universe."

"Oh, er quite. Quite so."

Mike Mercury and Doctor Venus were sitting opposite each other at the small table in the ship's cell. "What do we do now?" Mike asked as he glanced around their bare prison. "Since we've eaten our intimate little meal I guess I should be taking you out to a show or maybe..."

Venus smiled "...Maybe taking me back to your place to show me your etchings?"

"Would my jazz record collection do?"

For a moment Venus didn't reply. She felt uncomfortable talking this way with Mike. She was so worried about Steve - and Matt. But she had to help Mike and Doctor Beaker. That was her duty and keeping Mike's spirits up was vital. Besides, it boosted her spirits too, and her confidence. "Perhaps Mike..." she found herself saying, "...In another place and another time." She pushed back her chair and got to her feet. "I've just thought of what we can do here and now though." She cast a cautious glance towards the cell door and down the corridor. Mike watched with surprise as Venus began pulling up her green uniform tunic. "I'll just remove these..." she told him as she reached behind her waist and started unfastening catches. "Stand by the door and keep your eyes on the corridor in case anyone comes."

Mike did as ordered, wondering what Venus had in mind.

"There." Venus said quietly. "Come back to the table and shield me from view."

As Mike turned from the cell door he saw Venus was placing two green pouches on the small table. "Medical supplies." she explained.

"Oh...right." Mike nodded. "I see. So what's your plan Doctor?"

Venus sat back down at the table and opened one of the pouches. She took out a small transparent capsule.

"This is a fast acting heavy sedative. It's for use in extreme emergencies."

"Well, I guess this is an extreme emergency." Mike told her. "How are we going to use it?"

Venus removed a scalpel from the other pouch and a roll of adhesive bandage. "I'm setting a little trap..." she told Mike as she cut off a small strip of bandage with her scalpel. "The drug has to be introduced into the blood...normally with a hypodermic," Venus said as she carefully cut a hole in the capsule. Then she detached the sharp blade and poured the contents of the capsule over it. Gingerly she carried the wet blade over to the hatch by the door and began taping it to the inside edge.

"I get it..." Mike said quietly. "Next time we get a delivery, our host gets a surprise."

"A rather unpleasant one..." Venus nodded. "Without knowing the precise dosage I can't say how long they'd be knocked out - but at least several minutes." Quickly she picked up the left over items from the table and re-attached the pouches to her belt.

"That's a great plan Venus," Mike told her. "But what if they both come at feeding time?"

"Well, if one of them collapses, they'll need a doctor won't they?" Venus shrugged. "We'll just have to play this by ear and take our chances as they come."

"You're not just a pretty face." Mike grinned.

"No Mike....And thank you for the compliment."

Back in the ship's galley Beaker began to feel that he was running out of time. He urgently needed to confer with Mike to work out a plan of action. "I wonder if I might speak with Mr Mercury, see how he is, er, getting along."

Grizelda shook her head. "Trust me Doctor. Your Mister Mercury is, 'getting along' very nicely. I think we should leave the lovely Doctor Venus and her boyfriend alone together, don't you Boris?"

Boris smiled. "Indeed yes Grizelda. We shall leave them...alone."

"Go now Boris. Doctor Beaker and I have certain matters to discuss... Privately."

"But of course my love." Boris said as he reluctantly extinguished his cigar and headed for the door.

"And now, Doctor..." Grizelda said as Boris left the room "...You and I are going down to the business end. You must tell me all about your wonderful time machine."

Beaker felt more than a little uneasy. "Er...Oh yes, certainly, most certainly, er Grizelda."

"But first you will please excuse me while I slip into something a little more...comfortable."

"It must have been hours..." Mike said, pacing up and down beside the door.

"Twenty eight minutes." Venus told him, glancing at her watch.

"Will that stuff you used still work?"

"Mike, please. You should calm yourself down." Venus ran a hand through her blonde hair. "Yes it will work. Just be patient."

Mike smiled. "I guess you are more used to patients than I am."

Venus began to laugh, and then stopped abruptly. "Mike, someone's coming."

"Action stations!" Mike whispered.

"So you are enjoying yourselves?" Boris called as he entered the short corridor. "I am so glad to see that you get along so well with each other. We are leaving you here on this planet. You are of no use to us. I'm afraid there will be no more food or water."

"Uh?" Mike turned to Venus.

"He means they intend to kill us Mike. We cannot survive on this planet without supplies..."

Boris brandished a raygun. "You will play no tricks when I open this cell door."

"But that's not the plan!" Mike wanted to say. He glanced at Venus who seemed to be wanting to say the same thing.

Mike thought quickly. "If we are going to die..." he said firmly, as he turned back to face Boris. "Don't we get a last request?"

Boris considered. "Make your request - but I will tolerate no tricks."

"A custom of my people in the desert. I just want to share one last drink of water with Venus before..."

"Oh Mike..." Venus hugged Mike in a tight embrace and kissed him.

"Water?" Boris stared blankly at the entwined couple. "Very touching. I will grant you your last request - then you will be left to die." He turned on his heel and left.

"Er...Mike...you can let go now...." Venus whispered easing herself free of Mike's embrace. "That was quick thinking."

"Yeah...Not bad for a stranger in a strange land, I guess."

Venus straightened her tunic. "Listen, he's coming back."

"Your last request." Boris announced curtly. He held his raygun at the ready as he pulled open the access flap in the wall. "One glass of wat..??" he exclaimed as he fell senseless to the deck.

Mike quickly knelt beside the bars of the cell door, his hand straining to reach the fallen raygun. "Got it." he said triumphantly, as his fingers closed around it. He carefully drew the gun back into the cell and stood up to examine his prize. "Let's see. Hand grip, trigger, business end... Yeah, I think I've got it figured..."

"Be careful Mike, it's very powerful."

“Good! We’ll use that table as shield. I’m going to shoot that lock..”

Soon they were both crouching at the back of the cell, behind the upturned table. Mike aimed the gun carefully and gently squeezed the trigger. The lock and a large portion of the door disappeared in a blaze of white light. For a moment Mike froze, stunned by the power of the small gun that he held in his hand..

Venus quickly kicked away the remaining pieces of door.

Mike glanced warily down the corridor. “Okay, let’s find Doctor Beaker.”

“Wait Mike.” Venus said as she knelt down beside Boris’s prone form. She checked his pulse. “He’s alive...Just unconscious.”

“One down..” Mike said grimly “...One to go.”

Doctor Beaker stood alone in the spaceship’s galley. His mind was racing, trying to assess the situation and choose the best course of action. He decided he had only one option - to leave while he had the chance. He peered out of the open hatchway. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness outside he could see there was sheer drop of at least fifteen feet to the ground below. But the ship was standing next to a large rocky outcrop. There was a ledge some six feet from where he stood. He realized he’d be able to scramble down the rocks if he could jump across. Sudden noises startled him. An explosion of some kind. The sound of running footsteps.

“Now or never old boy...” he told himself. He stepped back a few paces from the hatch. Bracing himself he ran to the open doorway and flung himself out in a giant leap for the rock ledge... and never reached it.

10

To Be, Or Not To Be...

Doctor Venus and Mike Mercury were cautiously making their way through the corridors of the SS Thor.

"Which way now?" Mike whispered as they came to an intersection.

Venus looked up and down the corridor and saw that there were several doors along the passage, which was strewn with large crates and odd pieces of equipment. "I'm not sure" she said as she edged forward to get a better view. Then something familiar lying beside one of the larger doors caught her eye. "Look, it's my thruster pack." Quickly stepping over to the thruster pack, Venus looked around, getting her bearings. "This must be the hatch where I came in, so the control cabin is this way."

Mike glanced down the corridor and then back to Venus. "Can you fly this spaceship?"

"Yes, I think so. Once we have found Doctor Beaker and..."

"Shhhh!!!" Mike warned, pulling Venus back behind an untidy stack of boxes.

A little further along the corridor Grizelda emerged from a doorway, now clad in a long, dark red, low cut dress. She paused briefly before making her way down the corridor towards the hidden escapees. The scent of a rich, fragrant perfume permeated the air as she approached.

As Grizelda walked past the pile of crates, Mike silently stepped out behind her. "Hold it right there," he ordered, pressing his raygun into her back.

"Venus, see if she's got a gun."

Grizelda stood frozen to the spot as Venus searched her. "I have no weapon..." she hissed, through clenched teeth.

After making a quick check, Venus shook her head.

"You would not shoot..." Grizelda sneered.

"Try me." Mike responded coldly.

"What have you done to Boris?"

"Boris took a little nap in your guest quarters," Mike told her. "Now, where is Doctor Beaker?"

"Doctor Beaker is unharmed." Grizelda gestured to a closed door. "He's in there."

Mike pushed her forward with his gun. "Open it."

As the door to the ship's galley slid open it was clear to all that the room was quite empty.

"Where is he?" Mike demanded angrily.

"I..I do not know." Grizelda replied uneasily as she stared at the open hatch, "Unless..."

Venus walked over to the hatch and looked out into the darkness. "Mike... Beaker... He...he's fallen!"

It took Venus only a moment to dash back into the corridor to retrieve her discarded thruster pack. She was hastily buckling it on as she returned to the galley. "Mike, wait here, I'll see what I can do."

Venus jumped through the open doorway into the darkness beyond, her thruster pack slowing her fall to the rocky ground below. Doctor Beaker didn't move as she hurried to his side and flung off her thruster pack. The man was lying on his side in a pool of blood - evidently his head had struck a rock. Kneeling close beside her patient Venus was relieved to find that he was still breathing, but he was unconscious. She hurriedly set up a small but powerful flashlight and then got to work. Carefully she examined Beaker, gently wiping away the blood. She took a spray device from a

medical pouch and used it to seal broken and torn skin and stop the bleeding. The chemicals accelerated the body's natural healing process and encouraged wounds to heal rapidly. After wiping away more blood with a sterile swab, Venus began cautiously probing the injured areas with her fingers, carefully using another spray to freeze broken and fractured bone. The effects wouldn't last long, but at least Beaker could be moved back into the Thor.

At last, Venus sat back on her heels and looked towards the spacecraft. Mike was still waiting anxiously in the hatchway. "He's alive..." Venus called, "...but only just. I will have to operate. Grizelda, open your lower cargo bay door - we must get him aboard at once."

As Mike disappeared from view, Venus sat herself down beside Beaker, willing him not to die. She knew she'd have to operate soon - with whatever equipment she could find in the SS Thor. She had no choice but to do her utmost, and possibly fail trying. While Beaker was still alive he had a chance, and Venus knew she was his only chance. "Hold on Doctor..." she said softly as she tried to make him more comfortable. "Hold on." Long minutes dragged by, while Venus sat watching over Doctor Beaker as he lay unmoving in the small circle of light cast by the flashlight.

Venus turned her head at a sudden sound from behind her. A huge section of the Thor's hull was slowly swinging outward and down to form a broad loading ramp. A bright yellow light spilled out from the massive interior of the cargo bay. Inside Venus could see Mike and Grizelda.

"Mike!" she called, "Come and help me carry Doctor Beaker inside."

Mike pointed his gun at Grizelda. "You stay right there where I can keep an eye on you."

Grizelda gave him an icy smile. "I will not move."

The cargo bay lights illuminated the alien landscape as Mike hurried down the ramp and ran to join Venus. He drew in his breath sharply as he looked sadly down at Beaker's blood stained body. "Oh Doc..."

Venus stood up wearily. "I'm afraid it's touch and go Mike. I've stopped the bleeding, but there are head injuries. Help me carry him back inside. We must be very careful."

Mike nodded, "OK Doctor." He turned and called back to Grizelda, "Stay exactly where you are!"

Grizelda smiled another humourless smile. "You have my word. I will remain here inside the cargo bay while you are all outside." As she spoke, she slowly sat down on the deck and folded her arms. "But you are wasting your time. A first aid kit will not save Beaker's life. He will die. You are all utterly useless!"

Mike turned back to Venus as he tucked the raygun into his belt. "Ok, let's get him inside. I'll take his shoulders."

Suddenly there was a burst of sound - the thunder of a rocket engine. Mike felt a wave of heat pass over him as the S.S. Thor began to lift into the air. Grizelda was still sitting calmly in the cargo bay. She waved as the door slammed shut.

Mike and Venus watched in horror as the spaceship rose swiftly into the starry sky, leaving them alone on the planet's surface. It suddenly seemed very, very dark.

"The cold blooded.... Boris! He must have got to the controls...." Mike turned back to Venus. "I..."

Venus touched him gently on the shoulder. "Mike, I'll do what I can for Doctor Beaker, but without the proper facilities..."

Venus began to feel her hand slipping on Mike's shoulder. No, not slipping, sinking - sinking into his body. She jerked her arm away.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked in surprise.

"My hand... It was inside your shoulder..."

Mike felt his shoulder carefully. "I didn't feel anything."

"No...Neither did I." Venus felt the solidity of her own hand. "I must have imagined it,"

Mike put his arm around Venus's shoulders to comfort her, but to his horror, it passed right through her. He backed away in disbelief looking at his hands and then back at Venus. "What's happening?"

Venus didn't answer. She was trying to think. Trying not to panic.

As Mike stared, Venus began to look misty, transparent. He could see the stars shining through her as if she wasn't there - and suddenly - she wasn't.

"Venus!" Mike shouted desperately. "Where are you?"

Unknown to Mike, Doctor Venus was still standing beside him, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. She called out to Mike, but it soon became obvious that he could neither see nor hear her. Everything around her seemed to be growing dimmer as if the light were fading. The stars were no longer visible - yet her flashlight still seemed bright, but it no longer created a pool of light around Beaker. Venus tried to walk towards Mike but her feet just passed through the ground as if she were a ghost.

"I... am... not... dead!" Venus told herself firmly as she tried to regain her composure. "If I were a ghost, surely my body would be lying there on the ground next to Doctor Beaker." She began to think more calmly, feeling a strange sense of detachment. "If I'm not dead - what am I?" Almost instinctively Venus felt her left wrist, checking for a pulse. "A little high..." she said quietly, "...But under the circumstances..." She watched Mike as he put his hands to his mouth, obviously shouting, trying to find her. It was like

watching a silent movie. She wasn't part of this scene. She was on the outside, looking in.

As Venus became calmer, she started to feel very cold and breathing was becoming difficult. She took an oxygen pill from her belt pouch and quickly swallowed it. Immediately her breathing eased and the feeling of coldness subsided.

Mike had returned to Doctor Beaker and he now seemed to be looking right through her.

"Mike!" she called, waving her arms. "Mike! I'm here...I'm right here!" But Mike didn't hear. He sat down dejectedly beside Beaker.

Venus felt a scream welling up inside - she bit her lip to stifle it. But she couldn't stop the tears welling up in her eyes.

"Well done Boris!" Grizelda exclaimed cheerfully, as she stepped into the Thor's control room.

"Grizelda..." bleated Boris, without taking his eyes off the main console. "We are accelerating too quickly." He hurriedly throttled back the ship's motors and fired the retros.

"What is happening?" Grizelda demanded as she joined her husband at the controls.

"Our launch velocity was far too high... I cannot account for it."

"Never mind that now Boris. We escaped, and our guests have outlived their usefulness. We shall return to our secret base." Grizelda looked carefully at Boris. "They did not harm you?"

"I am fully recovered my love." Boris glanced down at his sore finger tips. "That treacherous female must have used a sedative drug." He turned back to the console and began setting a course for their secret asteroid base.

"All goes well Boris. The end of Steve Zodiac and his precious crew. Such a pity about the scientist, but I am sure we can find another one to crack the secrets of our time machine." Grizelda chuckled. "After all Boris, it is just a matter of time."

"Grizelda!" Boris suddenly wailed. "There is something wrong with the navigational equipment."

"What do you mean?"

"The planet below us is not registering...Not even on the gravity meter."

"This must be some trick... Someone has tampered with our neutronic electro-vogels! Try the emergency circuits."

"I have already switched to auxiliary systems. As far as our instruments are concerned - there is nothing out there - not even the stars."

Grizelda pointed to the main viewport. "The stars are still there Boris, as I'm sure our asteroid base will be. We cannot be fooled so easily. Besides..." she pressed a small stud on the console, "...there is always our homing beacon." A green light started flashing on the astrascope screen. "There! The homing signal from our asteroid. That's all we need to return. I will set the course. We will make repairs, and there is no need to hurry. Our enemies are dead, or if not, they soon will be."

On the day-side of planet Enigmus, Steve Zodiac and Professor Matic currently shared Grizelda's assessment of their predicament. They were both finding it hard to breathe, as the green sand had now risen to their chests - Matt was almost up to his neck in the quickly solidifying rock.

Steve's mind had never stopped trying to find a way out, a way to save his friend. Now it looked hopeless. "Guess this... Is it.... Matt."

"Yeah...Does... Kinda look...That way." Matt took in a gasp of air, "Everything is...growing dim, even the sun.."

"It can't end like this!" Steve thought bitterly. Instinctively his foot kicked forwards in a gesture of frustration. It took a moment for him to realize what he'd just done - or what he 'thought' he'd just done.

"Say...Matt....I think I just moved my foot..."

"Uh... I guess you... imagined it."

Steve felt the pressure around his chest begin to ease off. Was it imagination? Was he simply dying?

"Matt...Breathe deeper. Something is happening. I think this green stuff must be loosening."

"Jumping spacefish Steve!" Matt exclaimed. "You're right, the rock - it's no longer solid!"

Steve tried to push himself free but his hands simply passed through the green rock. "It's more like it's not there at all" he frowned. "I can move, but there's nothing to push against and I feel as though I'm weightless. It's like being out in space."

"Maybe the rock is still solid Steve, but we aren't."

"I don't understand."

"I think it's starting Steve...the non-existence....We are being erased from the space-time continuum."

"Then we failed? Something must have happened to Beaker and Mercury so they can never go back to their own time."

"Seems likely Steve. We can no longer logically exist because our past never happened, so we've been taken out of time."

"But why are we still alive?"

"That's got me licked too. I kinda anticipated us just disappearing - like a light going out."

"What about Venus? Fireball?" Steve asked, as he tried to think.

"Well I guess anything from our time has been moved out of the time-stream and placed into this, er, 'dimension', like unwanted scrap material. You can't have effect without cause."

"But surely the whole Universe can't have been erased Matt..."

"Maybe not. But, in theory, anything Beaker and Mercury did after 1961 has been undone. So human history has changed, and that's going to affect countless other worlds too. The ripples spread outwards."

Steve wondered for a moment whether he preferred the idea that he was a ghost to the idea that everyone he'd ever known had been 'erased' - because he had failed.. "Okay Matt, let's assume that's how it is, for now at least. We've got to find Venus and the others - they need our help. My guess is that Fireball is still where we landed.." He pointed. "It's over there, just beyond that ridge and it's stuck in this green stuff - or at least it was stuck."

"But Steve, how can we get back to Fireball? We can't move around."

"I'm betting our thruster packs will still work Matt. They're somewhere close by, where we dropped them. We just can't see because of this rock."

"Good idea Steve. Our bodies still function, so likely the thruster packs do as well...and maybe Fireball too."

"Yeah... And at least there's food, water and breathable air in Fireball."

Steve began removing his belt. "Time for a spot of fishing Matt. Give me your belt, I'm going to need a longer line."

Soon Steve had joined the two belts together and was swinging his 'line' down into the green rock. "If I get this wrong, I'm gonna send a thruster

pack sailing off out of reach. Gotta catch these 'fish' with the loop of my raygun sling as I pull it back towards me."

After the fifth attempt of casting his improvised fishing line out and gently pulling it back, Steve was beginning to think his plan wasn't such a good idea.

"Keep trying Steve." Matt urged. "An angler has to have a whole heap of patience."

"Maybe I'm using the wrong bait." Steve grinned and tried again. This time he felt a slight resistance as he pulled on the belts.

"Matt... I think I've got a bite..."

Matt remained silent as he watched Steve pull the belts this way and that, inch by inch. It took Steve two or three minutes of careful tugging to land his prize.

"You did it Steve!" Matt cheered as Steve reached down and held up one of the thruster packs.

"Not long now Matt..." Steve strapped on the thruster pack. "Don't go away..." He kicked slowly with his legs in a slow cycling motion. The thruster pack responded by moving him gently downwards, below the level of the rock surface.

"Are you OK Steve?"

"It's OK Matt. It's totally black down here but I can move around." Steve's head appeared, pushing up through the green rock. "Just need to get my bearings. Don't want to get lost down there...." He dived down again and quickly reappeared with the other thruster pack.

"Here you are Matt" Steve said helping Matt to strap it on. "Inside the rock feels no different to being above it. It's no more than a visual impression - there's no substance to it."

Matt looked thoughtful, “Maybe that’s how a ghost would perceive things Steve...”

“Yeah...and maybe that’s what we’ve become - ghosts.”



11

Fade To Black

Grizelda smiled with satisfaction as she steered the S.S. Thor towards the space spies' hidden asteroid lair. "We'll soon be home Boris. Engage the auto pilot - we are about to enter the asteroid field."

"Yes my love." Boris acknowledged, turning a knob on the main console.

"Now," Grizelda said as she walked to the door, "I will change out of these clothes and put on something a little warmer."

A warning alarm made Boris turn his attention back to the pilot console, where a red light was flashing urgently. Quickly he pulled a lever and fired the Thor's retro rockets, causing Grizelda to stumble in the doorway and almost fall, as the ship's gravity belatedly compensated for the sudden deceleration.

"What's happening?" Grizelda asked anxiously, as she hurried back to where Boris was frantically flicking switches and pushing buttons.

"Grizelda! The auto pilot is not registering the asteroids. We will have to use manual control."

Grizelda leaned over Boris's shoulder to scan the console readouts, "It will take us hours to navigate through all those stupid rocks!" She stepped over to the view-port and then stared in utter disbelief. "Boris, the asteroids, they are all gone!"

Boris joined his wife at the view-port, "There's nothing out there - not even stars. Nothing at all! The instruments were correct."

Grizelda fumed. Her enemies were surely dead - were they now back to haunt her? "Nonsense Boris. Not even Steve Zodiac could have caused the stars to vanish. It has to be a trick. Probe the immediate area with the astrascope - something is obviously obscuring the view-ports."

Down on the day-side of planet Enigmus Steve and Matt were using their thruster packs, flying low over the dark alien landscape.

Steve glanced up at the sky. "I don't get it Matt. The sun's pretty high, there's no cloud, but it's getting so dark... getting harder to see."

"Yeah, it's as if there are no light sources where we are now. We're just seeing light seeping in from 'outside'. Most of the sun's light is no longer reaching us."

"Sounds like we moved to a real boss dimension. No air and no light either. We'd better hurry Matt, we've got to find Fireball before the light goes completely."

They were able to travel for only a few more minutes before they found themselves flying in almost total darkness. Steve reached out a hand and gripped Matt's shoulder, "Hold it Matt."

They both stopped, floating side by side in the black emptiness.

"Can't see a darn thing, not even you Steve.." Matt complained as he adjusted his glasses.

"I can't see anything either." An icy fear was beginning to take hold of Steve, but he refused to let it show, "Don't worry Matt," he said firmly, "We'll find the ship, it can't be far away."

Steve kept very still. If he turned in any direction he knew he'd lose his bearings completely. "I guess we'll have to go on Matt. No sense in staying put until our oxygen runs out."

They moved forward very carefully, making slow swimming motions with their legs, their arms linked together.

Soon Steve could make out a small point of brightness somewhere below them - if 'below' had any meaning in this weightless excuse for an environment. "I think I can see a light Matt."

"Fireball?"

"I sure hope so. C'mon, let's find out."

Adjusting their orientation carefully to what would have been 'downwards' had the planet been present, Steve and Matt headed directly towards the distant light.

As the faint speck of light grew larger it began to resolve itself into a square.

"It's the jetmobile bay Matt, the hatch must be wide open."

They quickened their pace, flying like two moths rushing towards a lighted window on a summer's night.

Soon they could feel the slight pull of Fireball's artificial gravity as they drew near. The thruster packs automatically kept their velocity constant, but the sensation was that of being suspended face downwards. Instinctively the two astronauts swung their bodies around to enter the jetmobile bay feet first, landing lightly on the deck. Matt cautiously ran a hand over a bulkhead, "She feels solid enough Steve."

Steve thumbed a control panel and the huge hatch above them slowly swung shut.

Matt took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes in the unaccustomed brightness. "We made it!"

Steve took off his thruster pack and strode over to a wall locker. He took out two rayguns, handing one to Matt, "We'll check out the control cabin first, stay on your toes Matt." He snapped on the ship's intercom, "This is Colonel Zodiac - is anyone aboard?" He paused and then tried again.

There was no reply.

Entering the control cabin, Steve and Matt found Robert still sprawled forwards over the controls. He was totally deactivated. Matt hauled the robot back into the co-pilot's seat. "Some kind of neutronic neutralizer I'd guess..."

Steve sat in the pilot's seat, quickly assessing the ship's operational status. "Fireball seems ok, I guess the spies left her because she was probably half buried in that green rock."

"D'you suppose Venus and the others have been taken prisoner?"

Steve gripped the ship's controls tightly as he thought about the situation. Had Venus and the others put up a fight? Were they lying injured - or worse? Or were Boris and Grizelda still aboard? The two space spies had probably taken Venus and the others completely by surprise; they were both totally ruthless, and they bore a deeply rooted grudge against Steve and his crew.

Steve stood up, "I just don't know. We'd better do a full search of the ship Matt, no telling what's been going on here."

They split up, Steve taking the forward sections and Matt taking the aft section of the ship. Matt made his way down the ship's main corridor, checking each room in turn. He knew it had been sensible to split up to search the ship. All the same, he felt uneasy. He was no stranger to danger, but then again, he'd watched far too many old movies where spaceship crews and other unfortunates had split up to search for unspeakable horrors - and almost invariably come to a very bad end. The Professor took a deep breath. "Probably no one aboard," he told himself. "All the same, better be very careful..."

Once Matt had checked out all the rooms and corridors on the primary deck of Fireball, he made his way down the steps to the lower level. The lounge looked perfectly normal. There were a few mugs on the table and the smell of coffee still permeated the air. Pressing on with his search the Professor found the cargo bay empty. Now there was just one more area to search. He paused briefly before entering a narrow service corridor which ran along the centre of the lower fuselage. The lighting here was subdued. Pipes and conduits ran along the walls on either side and underneath the steel mesh of the deck itself and pieces of machinery jutted out here and there. At intervals the catwalk branched off at right angles to allow access to equipment bays and crates of supplies. Matt walked slowly forward, This would be a perfect place to hide. He didn't like to think what might be lurking behind every crate, every piece of machinery. He stopped occasionally, holding his breath and listening.

Matt was almost at the far end of the corridor when he thought he heard a noise up ahead. He stood stock still and waited. He heard the noise again, footsteps?. Someone was lurking, out of sight. "Come out and identify yourself!" he called out in as stern a voice as he could muster. There was no reply. Matt made his way to a wall intercom and switched it on. "Steve...There's someone down here, near the forward landing gear housing."

"On my way." Steve answered almost instantly.

A sudden scuffling sound made Matt's blood freeze. Then all was quiet again.

"Come out with your hands up." Matt ordered, pointing his raygun in the direction of the sounds he'd heard.

Suddenly another noise came from behind, but before Matt could react the sound of a raygun split the air and he was struck squarely in the back of the head.

Steve heard the sound of the raygun as he raced down the companion-way to the lower deck. He knew it wasn't Matt who'd fired; that had been the sound of a lethal blast - not a coma-ray. He heard the raygun fire twice more before he rushed into the service bay.

"Hold it Steve!" Matt called urgently, "Put away your gun."

Steve could see Matt standing in the corridor. He'd taken off his spectacles and was wiping his face with his sleeve.

"Matt?" Steve called, "What goes on? I heard shots..."

Matt was now edging towards a stack of crates, "Hold on Steve." He suddenly lunged behind the crates, "Gotcha!"

"Ho-o-wdy Fo-o-lks!" Zoonie exclaimed as Matt relieved him of a rather damp looking raygun.

By this time Steve was beside Matt, "A water pistol! But I heard..."

"Yeah...I must admit he gave me a fright. Zoonie was playing cowboys and moon-indians. Jonathan must have gotten him mimicking raygun noises." Matt took one of Zoonie's large paws in his hand. "Now, Lazoon. you come along with me."

Zoonie's tail waved from side to side, "Professor put the kettle on."

"From the look of you Matt, that lazoon is a great shot. You're soaked."

"Yeah. I guess he headed me off at the pass."

"Get Zoonie safely stowed out of harm's way and come up to the control cabin - I need you to fix Robert."

Doctor Venus floated, alone in an inky black void. She had watched helplessly as Mike Mercury and Beaker had slowly faded from sight. All she could see was the bright emergency lamp she'd placed on the now vanished ground.. It hung there like a solitary star. She couldn't even see her hands

in front of her face. Was she dead? How long had it been now? Minutes? Hours? She couldn't tell. She could still breathe so she reasoned it could only have been at most an hour or so. She had two more oxygen pills left, then she really would be dead. But could she die if she'd never really been born? In a way Venus was glad that she did not have more life sustaining pills. She'd surely go mad long before she died of thirst and hunger. She stared at the bright lamp, there was nothing else here to focus on. She could dimly make out her discarded thruster pack, well out of her reach. She knew it would be useless to use it in any case. There seemed to be nothing out there. She began to feel cold, a sure sign that the effects of the oxygen pill were wearing off. She swallowed another one. Somewhere Doctor Beaker was lying seriously injured, she had to get back to him - but how? She realised that without medical facilities all her efforts would have been in vain. That would not have stopped her trying, It seemed to her that she had been judged and found guilty. Time had pronounced judgement, 'it' knew that there was no longer the slightest chance of Mike and Beaker being returned to their own time to live out their lives. The mission had failed. She had failed. Until they'd been stranded, there had been a chance, but here on this planet, with no food, no water and that terrible creeping rock - death had been assured. Time could not be repaired, history had changed, and all the people she knew probably no longer existed. Her fault. Her responsibility. She stared at the accusing unblinking light. She wanted it to go away, to leave her alone. Venus closed her eyes and tried to stop thinking, and became acutely aware that soon thinking would not be a problem, her air would finally run out.

Steve turned in his seat as Matt came into the control cabin.

"How are things up here Steve?"

"Everything is fully operational - except for Robert."

The Professor examined the robot carefully.

Can you fix him?" Steve asked "I'm wondering if his recorder may have picked up something of what happened here."

Matt opened a panel in Robert's chest and began making adjustments. "It'll take a while to make full repairs...but I think I can get the recorder to work manually."

"Okay Matt, do what you can." As the Professor worked, Steve paced the deck, deep in thought. What had happened to Venus? Was she still alive?

It only took a few minutes for Matt to make the necessary repairs to the built in recording device. Robert's head was still slumped forwards and his limbs didn't move, but the lights in his optical receptors began to flash steadily.

Matt turned to Steve, "That ought to do it. I'm setting the recorder back to just after we left Fireball."

There was no sound, though Robert's eyes continued to flash.

"Guess Venus and the others were still in the lounge. Take the recording forward in steps of about ten minutes - there might be something there."

Matt patiently operated the recording device, listening, pausing, listening - pausing.

Suddenly they heard Venus giving orders.

"Robert! Emergency lift off!"

"Emergency lift off."

Steve and Matt listened intently as the events were replayed. They heard the sound of rocket motors roaring into life and rising rapidly in pitch and volume.

Steve glanced at the empty pilot's seat where Venus had been sitting only hours ago. "Fireball must have been stuck fast in that green rock."

Venus's voice again, "We're not moving! Robert full power."

"Full power."

The engines roared more loudly, almost drowning out Venus's words.

"The engines are overheating. Cut power Robert."

As Robert acknowledged the sound of the engines died away.

"I'll have to go outside to see what's wrong."

Steve looked at Matt, "If she left the ship on foot..."

Mike's voice: "Out there? I'll come with you."

"No Mister Mercury. But thank you. I'll have to use a thruster pack."

The recording fell silent again and Matt moved the recording along a few minutes.

Mike's voice: "What a woman!"

"Yes Mike. Remarkable. Quite remarkable."

"And she looks out of this world too...You know Doc. If we get through this..."

"Matt, " Steve interrupted, "Skip another five minutes. What happened to Venus?"

There was a roaring noise from Robert's speakers, rocket engines which suddenly fell silent.

Mike's voice again: "I guess they landed somewhere close by."

"Quite so... I imagine they must have landed, ah, aft of this ship."

"Sounds like they put their ship into freefloat nearby Matt."

"Yeah, " Matt agreed, "and Venus was outside - she wouldn't have stood a chance."

Mike's voice: "What's keeping Zodiac and where's Doctor Venus?"

"Since we're firmly stuck Mike, perhaps Colonel Zodiac is intending to haul us out of our predicament with the other ship."

"Maybe. But I don't like this situation. Suppose something has happened to Doctor Venus. We don't know that was Zodiac flying that other ship..."

"Mike, I am sure that Doctor Venus would have heard that confounded rocket approaching. It was quite deafen..."

Roberts eyes stopped flashing and the cabin fell silent.

"That's all there is Steve. Robert must've been knocked out at that point."

"So they bushwhacked Venus while she was outside."

"What now Steve?"

"We assume that Venus and the others are now prisoners aboard the spies spaceship and we find them. " Steve sat down heavily in the pilot's seat, "But I guess Boris and Grizelda could be anywhere by now..."

"Maybe not..." Matt gestured at the unending blackness beyond the cockpit windows. "My guess is they have nowhere to go - just like us. But I think I can find them easily enough."

"How Matt?"

"I figure that the S.S. Thor is probably the only other object in this dimension, and if I'm right we should easily be able to locate it."

"I get it... Like looking for a needle in a haystack - but without the haystack."

12

Kill Or Cure

The solitary star continued to shine, coldly, in the empty blackness.

Doctor Venus floated nearby, arms clasped tightly about her knees. Her mind was muddled. She couldn't seem to remember if she'd taken her last remaining oxygen pill or why it had seemed important. "Can't seem to think... so cold." She could hear nothing apart from her own shallow breathing. She closed her eyes and thought of nothing. There was nothing... Nothing but the enveloping coldness. In a way the coldness was a comfort to her, as the feeling of coldness was all she seemed to have left.

Professor Matic sat at his circular desk in Fireball's navigation bay, staring intently at his monitor screen. He was probing the starless void that lay outside the ship. Starless it might be, but there did seem to be something out there. The Professor frowned thoughtfully, "That's strange... Mighty strange... Steve?" he called over the intercom.

In Fireball's control cabin, Steve looked up, he'd been lost in his own thoughts. They hadn't been pleasant ones. He flicked on the intercom circuit, "Yes Matt? Have you found something?"

"Steve, that neutroni interference... It's still out there."

"We'll just have to... Say, but I thought those asteroids were causing it... And they're..."

"Yeah - they've gone right enough, but not that blanketing effect on the neutroni. Only the short range scanners work."

Steve stared out into the inky blackness, "Then I guess we've lost them Matt..."

"Maybe not. I've a hunch that jamming is artificial."

"I get it. Some kind of device that prevents detection - hidden amongst all those rocks - that aren't there any more."

"That's it Steve. Just like Fireball and the Thor, that jamming device is logically non-existent. It was never built so it's been dumped into this null dimension - or whatever this crazy place is."

"But how's that going to help us find Venus and the others?"

"Well, whatever the device is, it has to have an enormous power source to block neutroni radiation. I'm guessing that old Boris has a space station out here."

Steve felt a surge of hope, "Can you pin-point where the jamming comes from Matt?"

Matt was fine tuning the astrascope as he spoke, "Sure can. It's about the only thing I can find in this whole universe."

"Give me a course Matt. That's where they have to be."

"Hold it Steve!" Matt said suddenly "There's something else!"

"The Thor?"

"No... Too small to be a spaceship." Matt patiently squeezed more information from the astrascope. "Steve! It's a thruster pack beacon... and I think there's a body..."

Steve felt his blood run cold, "Where Matt?"

"Close. A few thousand miles. 2-5-8 zero-red, range 2-15 zero-black."

"Hold tight Matt, we'll deal with Boris later." Steve called as he fired Fireball's main motors.

Venus thought she felt something grip her shoulders, but her mind soon began to sink back down into the icy coldness. Then fear awoke her as she became aware of something pressing on her face, covering her nose and mouth. She instinctively tried to pull away but nothing happened, her muscles didn't respond. There was a sensation of pain in her chest. Her thoughts began to clear a little. "Respirator," her mind announced without emotion. "Breathing has ceased. Have to... Have to increase to rate 5... Stimulate the lungs..."

"Easy Venus," a voice seemed to be saying, "Just relax and let the respirator do the work. I'm taking you back to the ship."

Steve Zodiac held Venus tightly in his arms as he kicked his thruster pack into motion. He spoke excitedly into his radio, "Matt, it is Venus and she's alive!"

Steve stepped through the airlock, Venus still cradled in his arms. He glanced down at her; she was breathing now and her eyelids were starting to flutter. He adjusted the respirator, reducing the air flow to a gentler setting. Venus opened her eyes wide, looking around in confusion.

"Steve?" her muffled voice said through the mask of the respirator.

Steve squeezed her gently as he carried her out into the corridor, "Large as life. Don't try to talk, your oxygen pills ran out on you. We're back on Fireball now."

Venus struggled to remember as she was gently lowered to a bed in the medical bay and Steve removed the respirator.

"The horrible green rock! It moved... like it was alive." Then Venus flinched as her memories came tumbling back, "Matt - is he... Safe?"

"He's just fine , Zoonie is too. Now just take it easy."

Venus nodded and took some deep breaths.

Steve sat on the edge of the bed as he took Venus's pulse, "Boris must have captured Doctor Beaker and Mercury. They weren't aboard when we got back."

"Beaker!" Venus exclaimed, struggling to sit up.

"We'll find them Venus. You have to sleep now. I'll get you a sedative."

Venus shook her head, "But Steve, I was with them. We were abandoned on that horrid green planet. Beaker was badly injured in a fall. I was trying to save his life when..." Venus fell silent as the terror of the recent events overcame her. Steve took her hands in his as he waited for her to speak again.

"Beaker just vanished..." she said quietly, "Mike vanished too - or I did. I thought I was going mad."

"We'll find them. Right now you have to lie still and recuperate."

Venus managed a smile, "Yes Doctor Zodiac."

Steve grinned, "Well I am a qualified space first-aider. I'll give you a shot of..."

"Steve!!!" Matt yelled over the intercom, "The planet...It.. It's coming back! All around us!!"

Steve jumped to his feet and ran to the door, "Stay put Venus, I'll handle this."

Steve raced down the corridor and through the navigation bay. Matt was already hurrying up the ladder that led up to central control.

As Steve joined him under the domed canopy he was startled. The planet's dark rocky surface lay at a crazy angle in front of them as if XL5 was lying on it's side half embedded in the rock.

"Give me full power Matt, and hold on!" Steve called as he grabbed the controls and fired XL5's main motors.

Fireball flung herself forward and upward, away from the planet's surface. There was a sudden jolt. "Gravity...from the planet!" Steve called as he quickly altered Fireball's course to compensate.

"Steve!" Matt exclaimed as he struggled to regain his breath, "We're back... back in normal space."

"Yeah..." Steve agreed as he stared down at the rocky green globe floating below, "And we were nearly back half inside that planet. I'm taking us back down, this time the right way up... Mercury and Beaker will be down there, and Venus says Beaker is badly injured."

Boris was bringing the SS Thor steadily closer to its rocky lair. "Reducing speed for final approach... Opening entrance portal."

The huge door in the fake asteroid ahead slowly opened up to admit the spaceship. Rows of white lights shone a warm welcome from the landing pad. Grizelda sighed with satisfaction, "It is good to be home again. You can make repairs to our ship while I..."

All of a sudden the ship shuddered to a stop as if grabbed by some giant hand. Boris and Grizelda were thrown to the deck. The lights went out and alarm klaxons blared. Above the din, Boris could distinctly hear the ominous hiss of escaping air. As he struggled unsteadily to his feet Boris heard Grizelda's voice, "Boris... Help me!"

Venus lay on the bed, wide awake. She felt that her mind was very alert, but her body wasn't responding; it felt as if it didn't belong to her. She knew that if she rested her muscles would gradually recover; it would just take time.

Time...

She was back. She was real. The chances of fixing the flow of time had shifted from 'impossible' to 'possible'. For now. Mike and Beaker along with their Supercar could be returned to 1961. If they didn't go back then one hundred years of interplanetary history would be changed. No, she told herself, the chain of cause and effect stretched on into the infinite future. What did Beaker - or Mike - do that would change the course of history? Possibly not much - according to Chaos Theory. One minute change in a system can transform it into something very different. Every little thing is connected to everything else - either directly or indirectly. Perhaps Beaker made a great discovery - or perhaps Mike made someone smile. One thing leads to another...

Venus found it difficult to avoid thinking about Mike Mercury. He had to go back, back to his own time - and then he'd be dead. No, surely he'd be alive, just living a hundred years in the past? Time must be like space. Venus forced the thoughts from her mind. This was Matt's domain - she had work to do.

Beaker would be brought aboard soon. If she couldn't operate on him, then he'd die. She couldn't just lie there when someone needed her so badly. And what if he did die? She knew what that would mean for Steve, Matt, everyone - they'd be gone - not dead - gone in some horrible way that meant they'd never ever existed. It was down to her.

Venus considered the options; there was only one. She would have to take a neural stimulant to force her fatigue laden body to function. It would be a severe shock to her already over taxed nervous system - it might be fatal. But there was no choice.

With an enormous effort, Venus sat up and swung her legs off the bed and on to the floor. She managed to get unsteadily to her feet but had to sit down again quickly as her legs gave way beneath her. Trying again, she was able to stumble awkwardly across the floor to the medical cabinets on the far wall. Reaching up, she carefully took a hypodermic and a small vial of blue liquid from one of the cabinets, her hands shaking with the effort. Now utterly exhausted, she let herself slide down the wall to a sitting position on the floor, still tightly clutching the medication.

Consciousness began to slip away; Venus had to force herself to stay awake. Rolling up her left sleeve, she prepared the hypodermic. She knew Steve would have forbidden her to take this risk. But she had no choice. She was the only person that could save Beaker's life - she had no doubt of that whatsoever. She'd been allowed a second chance and she had to take it.

Venus experienced an odd feeling of detachment as she sat watching the blue liquid from the hypodermic slowly disappearing into her arm. Her heart-beat quickened, then became wildly erratic. There was a loud pounding in her ears, and a purple darkness began to obscure her vision...

13

Saving Time

Steve sealed the outer hatch as soon as they'd got Mike Mercury and Doctor Beaker safely aboard. "Get Beaker to the medical bay Matt - I'm going to get Fireball well away from this planet, then we'll see what we can do for him."

Mike anxiously followed Professor Matic, who was pushing a floating stretcher quickly down Fireball's main corridor. On the stretcher lay the unconscious body of Doctor Beaker.

"We'll make him as comfortable as we can..." the Professor was saying, "Then get him to a hospital."

There was something about the Professor's tone that worried Mike.

"Will he make it Professor?"

Matt stopped and looked sadly back at him, "I'm no doctor Mike, but he doesn't look good. We'll do our darndest to save him."

Mike knew they would. Whether or not there was a crazy time paradox involved, these people would do their utmost to save a life.

Mike's thoughts shifted back to Doctor Venus. She was one of the crew, a woman who faced deadly danger as routine - so that she could help to make the Universe a better place. Now Venus was back aboard but lay ill herself; he'd been told that much by Colonel Zodiac. He had been so matter of fact, so cool. Mike had to remind himself that the Colonel patrolled outer space for a living - and the Earth's security was in his hands; Earth - and who knew how many other worlds... How could any man cope with that kind of responsibility? Mike felt very small.

"Here's the medical bay, Mike."

"Uh... OK Professor."

As the two men brought the stretcher into the medical bay a voice called out to them from the next room, "Bring him into the operating theatre right away."

Venus appeared in the doorway, her face pale. She wore an operating smock and was already putting on a surgical mask.

"But Venus, Steve said that you shouldn't move..."

"Venus! Are you OK?" Mike halted in mid-step when he saw Venus gesture to him to stay where he was.

"I took some stimulants."

"Stimulants?" Matt asked, "But I thought..."

"Never mind that now Professor. Please, both of you, just do as I say."

As soon as Beaker had been gently placed on the operating table Venus told the men to leave. Matt knew better than to protest and he took Mike's arm and hurried him out of the room.

"Won't she need some help?" Mike asked when the door had closed behind them.

Matt shook his head, "Best not to argue with her when she's like that. She's a fine surgeon - one of the best. I sure ain't gonna argue with her about medical matters."

Mike frowned, "But what was all that about stimulants? She didn't seem... Didn't seem herself at all."

The two men turned as Steve strode into the medical bay, "Say, where's Venus?" he asked, seeing that her bed was empty.

Matt coughed awkwardly and nodded in the direction of the operating room behind him "She's preparing Doctor Beaker for surgery Steve. Wanted us out of her way."

Steve was clearly shocked, "But Matt, she hardly had the strength to talk - let alone..."

Mike was unsettled to see Steve looking so concerned; he guessed that Venus must have taken some awful risk.

Matt shrugged helplessly, "She said she'd taken stimulants..."

"OK Professor, I get the picture. You two go grab a bite to eat, I want to have a word with Doctor Venus."

Once they had left Steve quietly opened the door to the operating room and stepped inside. Venus was engrossed in making some notes on a clipboard and didn't look up. Steve didn't approach. He waited, patiently for her to finish.

Finally, Venus stopped writing and looked at him, her own face expressionless, "Oh Steve. I'll have to operate on the head injuries. He has a good chance. I'll begin in a few minutes, once the anaesthetic has taken effect. I don't require assistance for the procedure."

Steve knew he'd just been dismissed by his doctor of space medicine. He also knew that she had the authority to do so in a medical emergency.

"Doctor Venus - I would like to speak with you for a moment." Steve was finding it hard to keep his voice level. He gestured to the door.

Venus nodded impassively and still carrying her clipboard, followed Steve back into the outer room.

As the door closed Venus looked blankly at Steve, "Yes... Colonel?"

Steve had grown used to the way that Venus could cloak herself in her medical professionalism when she needed to. This was different. She was cold, distant. "Venus, Matt says you took some kind of stimulant, but..."

"Yes. I had to give myself a shot of neuromythene - otherwise I would have been too weak to help Beaker."

Steve gripped Venus's arm, "Neuromythene? Venus - that stuff can be lethal, and you were in no condition..."

"I am a doctor. I know that. The critical period is when the drug enters the bloodstream - I'm still alive, and able to perform the operation."

Steve felt a strange sense of anger welling up inside, "Why did you take that stuff? You needed complete rest. We can get Beaker to the Derrian System in less than five hours, get him to a hospital."

"He'd be dead on arrival Steve. Our duty is to preserve life - and I willingly risk mine to perform that duty. just as you do. I can save him if I work fast. I feel fine right now. My mental faculties and physical dexterity are at optimum levels - I've tested myself. I have about three hours before the neuromythene begins to dissipate to a critical level. Trust me Steve, I know what I'm doing."

Steve realized he was still gripping Venus by the arm and he released her, "You knew I wouldn't have let you do this..."

"Yes. But it's the only way We have to get Beaker and Mike back to their own time - we both know that."

Steve nodded, knowing that she was right but hating it all the same.

"Venus, I'm sure that Doctor Beaker is in safe hands."

Venus managed to force a smile, "Thank you. Oh, and I must compliment you on your first aid - you re-froze the cranial fracture perfectly."

Steve raised a hand, "Not me. We didn't give him any treatment, just brought him aboard."

Venus glanced at her clipboard. "That's incredible. The freezing should have worn off an hour ago..."

"Mercury told me you'd only been gone a few minutes before we picked them up."

"But how can that be?"

Steve shrugged, "Matt thinks we were taken out of time - and then brought back to more or less the instant we disappeared. So I guess Beaker has bought himself some time."

"He's certainly got a much better chance." Venus looked at her watch, "Steve, I have to get back to my patient now."

Steve nodded, "And I have to get after Boris and Grizelda. They've got the Supercar hidden somewhere and we've got to get it back. Matt thinks he's found their base, here in this solar system."

"I understand Steve... But for the operation I'll need the ship to be as stable as possible."

"That's what I figured, so I'm taking Fireball Junior. Matt will stay here - ready to help if you need him, but I'll take Mike with me. If we find the Supercar, he's our expert on how it works."

A short while later Steve was sitting in Fireball Junior, making pre-flight checks. Mike sat in the co-pilot's seat, attentively watching the dials and gauges. Steve flicked open the intercom, "Guess we're all set Matt. We'll be out of radio contact while that neutroni jammer is operating."

Matt replied immediately, "Steve, I've been thinking. Try not to damage that thing - we may need it."

"Whatever you say Professor. See if you can get Robert fixed up while we're gone, we may need him too."

"Roger Steve. Good luck to both of you."

"Thanks - guess we'll need it." Steve turned to his companion, "OK Mike, fasten your seat belt."

Mike looked down but could see no sign of a belt.

"Sorry." Steve said as he saw Mike's confusion. He reached across and pressed a stud, "It's a localized inertial damping field, works like an old fashioned seat belt but is a little more effective. Sometimes the ship's artificial gravity is a fraction of a second slow responding to a jolt - your 'seat belt' will respond instantly."

Mike shifted experimentally in his seat, "I don't feel anything."

"Yeah,..." Steve grinned, "...that's the general idea. We are in for a bumpy ride. All set?"

"All set Colonel." Mike nodded.

There was a soft hiss as Fireball Junior shot forwards into space, leaving the main section of the ship in freefloat, thousands of miles above the planet Enigma.

Steve gestured to the controls, "Don't touch anything unless I tell you."

Mike was growing tired of being regarded as a useless antique, even if that's what he was; "I'm a professional test pilot, Colonel. I've flown everything from fighter planes to 707s."

Steve glanced across to Mike, "Seven oh whats?"

"Passenger jets - state of the..." Mike raised his hands, "Yeah, I won't touch a thing." He decided to change the subject, "So where is this base of theirs?"

"Professor Matic thinks it's hidden in a field of asteroids on the edge of this system - be there in a few minutes. Matt gave me the precise location but picking our way through all those chunks of rock will take time."

Mike examined the coma raygun that Steve had given him. "So this thing is a knock out gun?"

"Yeah. Unlike the gun you took from Boris, this one has a stun setting. It'll induce a coma that lasts several hours. Use it like one of your old fashioned revolvers - I hear you're quite a marksman."

"I guess I'm pretty good Colonel. Do you think it'll come to a fight?"

Steve considered, "Boris and his wife are deadly, and treacherous. I don't think they'll just hand over your Supercar if we ask them nicely."

Mike thought of Masterspy and Zarin, "Yeah, guess I know the type. So, what's your plan?"

"We have a big advantage over them - surprise. This ship is heavily armed and more than a match for theirs."

"And the base? How do you suppose it'll be defended - and will they have friends there?"

"Friends?" Steve shrugged, "No, that's not their style. They always work alone. As for defences, I'm hoping they rely entirely on their neutroni damping device that stops anyone finding them."

"Just what is a neutroni?"

"A theoretical quasi-particle radiation that we use for instantaneous radio communications and as a kind of radar. Without neutroni we'd be almost deaf and blind out here in space, with the stars many light years apart."

"But you say neutroni is theoretical?"

Steve grinned, "Yeah. In theory neutroni radiation can't exist - but we use it anyway. The universe is a pretty strange place..." Steve fired Junior's

retro rockets, bringing the ship's speed down to a crawl as they entered the asteroid field.

"The forward scanners are useless..." he told Mike, "Have to go in slow and careful."

"Yeah...sounds good to me." Mike gulped as a rock the size of a large house tumbled silently past the cockpit windows.

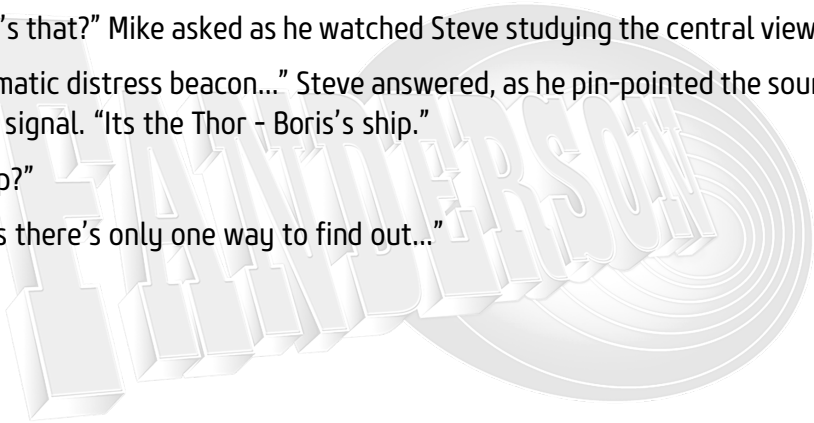
A faint beeping sound caught Steve's attention. He turned to his radio and made some adjustments. The beeping became louder.

"What's that?" Mike asked as he watched Steve studying the central viewer.

"Automatic distress beacon..." Steve answered, as he pin-pointed the source of the signal. "Its the Thor - Boris's ship."

"A trap?"

"Guess there's only one way to find out..."



14

All That Remains...

The huge, silver-grey, primary hull of Fireball XL5 hung silently in space, awaiting the return of Fireball Junior. Far below gleamed the bright green crescent of planet Enigmus. Professor Matic sat in Fireball's Central Control; above him, through the transparent dome, shone the light of countless stars. Only one light currently occupied his attention, the light on the screen in front of him. The light that indicated Fireball Junior's position as it headed out towards the belt of asteroids on the edge of the system. As he watched, the light began to flicker, and a few seconds later was gone. "Out of range - darn that interference!" Matt muttered to himself. "Guess you're on your own now Steve - good hunting!" The Professor climbed down the ladder to the main deck. He'd never found it easy to put the others out of his mind when they were in danger, but right now he had his own part to play, and no small part at that. "I'd best get some work done..." he smiled. "Otherwise I'll start talking to myself..." Matt made his way to his laboratory. If Venus needed him she'd call on the intercom circuit. No news was good news.

Zoonie greeted Matt as the lab door slid open, "Professor... Professor put the kettle on."

"Now, now lazoon," Matt told him, "I've no time for any of your fooling around."

Zoonie dutifully slunk back to his basket and flopped down.

"You can play later. Right now I've got a patient to take care of." The Professor hauled the inert form of Robert up onto his laboratory workbench, "I guess you're gonna be needing a complete recharge Robert." He sighed wearily as he adjusted his glasses, "Could kinda do with one myself. Y'know

Robert, I reckon it's going to be down to old Matthew Matic to get our two passengers back to 1961, along with their Supercar." He paused as he connected power lines to the robot's chest. "Yes sir, I'm the one who's going to have to perform that miracle. I'm just wondering how in space I'm gonna do it..." Satisfied that the cables were properly connected, the Professor switched on the power. "Now you just lie there and soak up that power Robert, while I come up with a plan. Guess it might take time..."

Fireball Junior drew closer to the source of the distress call, deep in the heart of the asteroid field. At the controls, Steve Zodiac was speaking urgently into the neutroni radio, "This is Fireball XL5 answering your distress call - please respond, Thor." The only reply was the crackle of static. "Still no answer. They aren't far away now, even with the radio jamming effect they should be able to pick us up." He tried to contact the Thor several more times without success. "It's an automatic distress beacon, they may not be able to use their radio."

In the co-pilot's seat, Mike nodded as he re-examined his raygun thoughtfully. "If this is a trap - They've got a bigger ship ..."

"Yeah. But Fireball Junior packs a mighty big punch and in close combat in an asteroid field she's far more manoeuvrable." As if by way of demonstration, Steve rolled Junior to avoid an orbiting ball of rock, the stars wheeled about them but artificial gravity removed all sensation of movement.

Mike instinctively gripped the arms of his chair. "It's like sitting at a drive in movie - sights and sounds but I don't feel a thing."

"If we take damage or I have to make sudden changes to our velocity you'll find the ride gets a lot rougher." Steve reached into a belt pouch, "Here, swallow this pill."

Mike took the pill and inspected it, "What's this one? Anti-motion sickness or ham and eggs?"

Steve grinned, "It's an oxygen pill. If the ship gets holed it'll help you to stay alive."

"Great." Mike acknowledged and swallowed the pill. "Nice sugar coating. Just let me know if I start to rattle."

Steve swung the ship upwards to avoid another asteroid and then headed downwards again once they'd cleared it. "I'll be happier when I can get a visual of their ship - but at least we know they are close by."

Very soon the Thor came into sight, and they could see at once that it was badly damaged - very badly damaged. Only the forward section was visible, the rest of the vessel was buried deep in the solid rock of an asteroid.

Steve whistled, "I've never seen a collision like THAT before!"

"Oops! Looks like they had a little trouble parking..." Mike agreed.

Steve carefully brought Fireball Junior alongside the wreck, "Say, look, directly ahead - that's no asteroid!"

Mike stared, "The one with the huge brightly lit cave? Yeah, I'd say that's artificial."

"Looks like the Thor was heading there when it popped back into the space-time continuum."

"And it popped into a rock?"

"I'd better go check if there are survivors aboard."

"Survivors?" Mike asked doubtfully, "In that?"

"That pair have more lives than a space-cat."

"Want me to come along?"

"You couldn't handle a thruster pack without proper training - best if you stay aboard. Keep your eyes peeled for trouble - I've left the radio on and I'll stay in contact."

A few minutes later Mike was astonished to see Steve, raygun in hand, floating towards the stricken Thor without a space suit...

Steve spoke into his communicator, "Ok I'm heading for the main hatch - you see me?"

"I see you Colonel - but I don't believe what I'm seeing. How can you survive out there?"

"Oxygen pills Mike - like the one you took. Now, keep those eyes peeled for trouble."

Steve clipped his radio to his belt as he drew nearer to the wreck of the Thor. Reaching out his left hand, he thumbed the button beside the main hatch and the door slid open. It was dark inside, apart from a mass of winking red lights on the control panels. Steve switched on his flashlight. Stark black shadows grew and then shrank away as he edged out of the doorway and into the control cabin. He panned the flashlight around the walls. Two of the walls now appeared to be rough outcroppings of grey rock. There was no sign of life - or death.

Suddenly, something caught Steve's eye, and he moved forward to investigate. There, protruding from a chunk of asteroid, from waist height to the deck, was a shimmering length of dark red silk. Steve reached out to touch it and found it was held fast, as if it had grown out of the rock. He let it drop limply from his fingers as he turned his attention back to the control consoles. One red light went out as he switched off the distress beacon. Then Steve turned, leaning against the control console, his eyes once again drawn to the forlorn- looking shred of red silk. He was certain that the asteroid now filled over half of the control cabin.

Over in Fireball Junior the suspense was beginning to get to Mike as he stood by the windows hoping to glimpse Steve's return.

"Mike..." Steve's voice crackled over the radio, "There's no one aboard and all the air's gone. If Boris and Grizelda weren't engulfed in the asteroid they abandoned ship. Aft of here is just solid rock." Steve soon appeared in the Thor's hatchway, and waved to Mike. "I'm coming back over. If Boris and Grizelda got out of there they'll have made for their base." He kicked with his legs and his thruster pack carried him swiftly back towards Fireball Junior.

"What's the plan?" Mike asked as Steve came back into the control cabin.

"We take no chances. We'll have to assume that our two friends are still alive and waiting for us in that fake asteroid. That's where Supercar will be - and we need it in one piece if we're gonna get you home."

"And you said they aren't likely to give Supercar back if we ask nicely..."

"No, but I'm prepared to give that a try." Soon Steve was nosing Fireball Junior forwards at a low speed, "Hold on Mike, we're going in..."

The brightly lit, rectangular opening in the "asteroid" grew larger as they approached. Mike had not been able to judge the scale before, but now he realized the gaping doorway must be at least a hundred feet across.

Steve kept a close eye on his instruments as Fireball Junior swept soundlessly into the huge hangar. He flicked a switch and landing retros flared, "There's gravity," he told Mike.

Fireball Junior's landing gear unfolded as Steve turned the ship around to face the star studded blackness of the hangar doorway.

"Touchdown." he announced. "Come on, let's get out there and go find your Supercar."

"But this place is wide open to space..."

Steve nodded as he climbed out of his seat, "There's no air and not a great deal of heat either. It's too large a volume to pressurize, doors would just be part of the camouflage. Don't worry, that oxygen pill you took is all you'll need."

Mike followed Steve into the jetmobile bay, "You're kidding. You mean we're just going to take a stroll - with the place open to hard vacuum?"

"You saw me go over to the Thor, Mike. No space-suit, just one of those little old oxygen pills."

"I guess it's kinda hard for me to swallow that, Colonel..."

"Well," Steve told him as he strapped his thruster pack on, "You can stay here in Junior if you want to - but I'd appreciate having someone to watch my back."

"Ok, whatever you say. I guess I've seen enough weird things now to believe anything is possible."

Mike was surprised to hear the sound of his own footsteps as they walked down the steps and out of the ship. "I can still hear... But if there's no air..."

"It's a useful side effect of the oxygen pills."

"But how?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask, Mike." Steve smiled, "I'm only a pilot."

By now Mike had learned that Steve was only going to tell him what he needed to know - and nothing more. Still, Mike reflected, at least that meant he thought that getting them back to 1961 was possible - even likely. "I don't feel cold, but not exactly warm either - strange."

"That's because your body temperature is being kept at equilibrium," Steve told him. "You get used to it."

Both men now stood on the bare metal deck, scanning the enormous steel cavern that surrounded their spaceship. The floor and ceiling were dotted with bright circular lights, but the walls appeared to be dark and featureless.

"No red carpet." Steve observed, "I guess we're not expected. Let's give this place a thorough search - and keep your gun ready."

"Where do we start?" Mike turned to glance at the huge open mouth of the hangar and the myriad bright stars. Involuntarily he tried to take a deep breath of air. The next moment he was clutching at one of Junior's landing legs to steady himself.

Steve took his arm, "Just take it easy Mike. Tell yourself there's all the air you need and let the oxygen pill do its thing."

Mike gulped and nodded, trying hard to avoid concentrating on his breathing.

"You're doing great Mike. The first time is always difficult. Common sense tells you that you can't breathe and you're gonna die, while your body tells you you're just fine."

"Thanks. " Mike said as he straightened up "I'm OK now. Where shall we start looking?"

"I think I spotted some kind of storage area over there on the left. Supercar may well be there. The pressurized section of the base must be over that way too."

Mike gripped the handle of his raygun a little tighter, "And I guess that's where we'll find our hosts - if they are still alive."

They started walking.

Suddenly, a sixth sense made Steve whirl around, "The doors are closing!"

There was no sound but the rectangle of stars was shrinking, becoming a narrow ribbon. "It's probably automatic." Steve said, half to himself. Then all the lights went out and the hangar was plunged into darkness.



15

Hammered Home

Mike Mercury stood motionless in the cavernous hangar of the space spies' disguised base. He knew that Colonel Zodiac was still close by - or at least he fervently hoped that he was. It was impossible to see anything in the total darkness, and the only sound that he could hear, was that of his own breathing. Clearing his throat, Mike quietly evaluated the situation, "I don't like this, Colonel..."

Keeping his ray-gun levelled, Steve was instinctively moving his left hand down to the flashlight clipped to his belt. He paused. "Mike... No sense in using our flashlights, this darkness is the only cover we've got. Keep very still - we don't want to lose our bearings."

"Should we try to get back to the ship?"

"No." Steve said, carefully weighing up the situation. "Maybe we still have surprise on our side. In this vacuum sound won't carry. Junior won't have made a sound getting in here. If our friends are around they probably wouldn't be expecting us to pay a visit - they left us for dead. On the other hand..."

"...They may be out there waiting to pick us off."

"Let's assume they are. But we've got to get your Supercar at all costs. Keep your gun ready but don't shoot unless I give the word. We're gonna make a dash for the storage area up ahead. I reckon it's about fifty yards. You ready?"

"Ready." Mike confirmed.

"Right. Lets go!"

The two men plunged forward into the blackness. There was no hail of gunfire as Steve and Mike sprinted across the steel deck of the base. Mike found he had to fight off the sensation that he was dreaming as his senses strained to analyse his surreal situation. He could feel no air resistance on his face as he ran on blindly, and his pounding feet made very little sound in the airless chamber. Thankfully, the oxygen pill he'd taken seemed to have no difficulty in providing his lungs with all the air they needed.

"Slow up!" Steve hissed, "We must be about there now."

Sure enough they soon bumped into some packing cases which were stacked up against the wall. Mike rubbed his bruised shin, "So far so good. Now what do we do?"

This time Steve did use his flashlight, to carefully inspect their immediate surroundings. "I think this is what we came for, Mike!"

A pool of light illuminated a familiar red and white shape.

"Supercar!" Mike exclaimed as they quickly made their way over to the stolen vehicle. "Think we can steal her back?"

Steve shook his head, "Not if those spies are at home. Let's check this place out."

It didn't take them long to find an airlock and gain access to the pressurized part of the asteroid base. The airlock opened onto a short, curved corridor. Automatic lighting flickered on, as if awakening from deep slumber. There were five steel doors set into the wall. Each door automatically slid open

at the approach of the two visitors. The first four small compartments were clearly living quarters, the fifth, which contained an assortment of electronic equipment was obviously the control centre. There was no sign of Boris or Grizelda.

Stepping into the control room, Steve returned his raygun to his belt, "I guess there's nobody at home Mike."

"What do you suppose happened to those two crooks?"

Steve frowned as he remembered the forlorn looking shred of red silk embedded in the rock inside what remained of the SS Thor, "Their luck must have finally run out. Boris and Grizelda are dead and buried." The Colonel felt a chill run down his spine as he said the words. Commander Zero had talked about Mike and Beaker being 'dead and buried'. The man he was talking to had died a long time ago. Somewhere, back on Earth, he probably had a grave...

"Buried? You mean you think...?"

"I don't think they left their ship. The Professor wants that neutroni jammer, I guess it won't take us long to find it."

"So what does a neutroni jammer look like?"

Steve shrugged, "Now you've got me. I hope it says, 'Neutroni Jamming Device' on the front."

Mike grinned, "I guess in your line of work you always have to sound like you know what you are doing."

"Yeah - and hope to heaven that I do." Steve began walking around the small room, closely examining each console in turn.

Mike thought all of the gadgets looked pretty weird, but one particularly caught his attention. In a way, it looked almost familiar. "Do you suppose this might be it Colonel?" Mike asked hopefully as he stooped to examine

the device more closely. It appeared to be a collection of shiny steel spheres and cylinders connected by copper rods, and it had a healthy number of flashing lights positioned here and there.

Steve hurried over to inspect the neutroni jammer candidate. "Could be..." he said thoughtfully, "What makes you think it's this one?"

"It looks like something Beaker and Popkiss might have cooked-up - you know, kinda home made."

Steve glanced around the room, "I can figure what most of the other consoles are for. All pretty routine. I guess there's one way to find out if this is what we're looking for - I'll pull the power plug..."

Matt was in his lab, ticking off the final systems check on his clipboard with satisfaction. He patted Robert on the shoulder, "OK Robert, I guess you're fit for duty. Go to Central Control and stand by."

Robert's optical receptors flashed as he repeated the command before striding smoothly out of the laboratory.

Matt had almost finished carefully putting away his tools when a low, rhythmic, rumbling sound almost made him jump. "Tarnation!" Matt chuckled when he realized it was just Zoonie, snoring peacefully in his basket. "Guess I'll just let sleeping lazoons lie and go do some work in the Navigation Bay."

As the Professor walked down the ship's main corridor a voice from a wall intercom halted him in his tracks, "Fireball Junior to XL5..."

"Steve!" Matt exclaimed as he hurried to the radio and thumbed the activation button, "XL5 to Fireball Junior, go ahead Steve."

"Everything is A-OK here Matt. We're in the spies' base. Your guess was spot-on. It's disguised as an asteroid, I'd say it's a type 5 space-station. We

have Supercar, and the Thor's out of action for good and I think we've seen the last of Boris and Grizelda."

"That's real boss Steve. And you must have found the neutroni jammer too."

"Yeah, we're just having it gift wrapped for you then we'll head on back. How's Venus doing?"

"She checked in about fifteen minutes ago Steve. She reckons Beaker's condition has stabilised and she thinks he'll make a full recovery.!

"That's boss Matt."

"I'll get to the Navigation Bay and plot you a course through those asteroids."

"Thanks Professor - I'll call you up again when we're ready to leave."

"Thank goodness the Doc's going to be OK." Mike said with relief, "Doctor Venus sure is some woman!"

"Yeah," Steve replied as he returned his radio to his belt, "She sure is."

Something in the Colonel's tone suggested to Mike that it might be a good idea to change the subject, "What was that about gift-wrap Colonel?"

"We're gonna be taking this gadget out into hard vacuum - it doesn't look like it's built for extreme conditions."

"So what do we wrap it in?"

Steve opened a wall locker and began tossing things aside as he searched through the contents. He brought out a small yellow cylinder, "Here's what we need - it's an insulation foam. You can fix minor air leaks with it or..." Steve aimed the device at the console and sprayed a thick layer of white foam over it, "Or gift wrap items like this for safe transit."

"Looks like fire retardant foam."

"It dries hard as rock in a few seconds." Steve stepped back to admire his handy work, "That ought to do it. Give me a hand. We'll carry it back through the airlock and pick up your Supercar."

"Pick up?"

Steve grinned as they manoeuvred the equipment into the airlock, "Your Supercar is still on the cargo-sled the spies used to unload it from their ship.

We can easily push it back over to Fireball Junior."

The steel door closed behind them and they waited for the outer door to open. Mike could feel a popping sensation in his ears as the air pressure in the small chamber began to drop rapidly as the air was pumped out. He forced himself to stay calm, "So, er, are cargo sleds like the floating stretcher you used for the Doc?"

"They're similar," Steve told him, "but the sleds simply operate by electromagnets pushing against other magnets sunk into the hangar floor."

The hangar lighting circuits activated automatically as the outer airlock door slid open. The two men carried the neutroni jammer over to Supercar and lowered it gently into the passenger seat.

Walking to the rear of Supercar, Steve reached down to swing the sled's 'T' shaped control bar up into position. At the flick of a switch the sled became visible as a wafer-thin rectangle of metal as it lifted Supercar a few inches off the deck.

Mike was impressed, "Sure beats a fork-lift truck!"

"I'll just open the hangar door." Steve said as he started to walk over to a control panel set into the wall beside the airlock, "Then we'll get Supercar over to Fireball Junior."

Back in Fireball XL5 Matt was settling himself down into his seat at the navigation console. He was relieved to see that all of the ship's scanners were now fully operational. By skillful manipulation of the controls Matt brought a portion of the asteroid field into sharp focus on his viewer. One of the asteroids drifted to the centre of the screen and then increased in size as the image was magnified. "Yeah, guess Steve's right, has to be a type 5 right enough. Now for that course..."

Matt swung his circular desk round to face a large wall screen. The image on the screen blurred and then resolved itself into a matrix of intersecting coloured lines. Each intersection represented an asteroid and beside it it's co-ordinates gave its position.

To Matt's surprise one of the sets of numbers was changing rapidly - far too rapidly. For a split second he stared open-mouthed in disbelief, then turning back to his console he quickly cross checked his data. "Steve!" he yelled into the radio, even before his fingers found the switch, "Steve! You've both gotta get out of there right now!"

Steve snatched his radio from his belt, "Matt - what's wrong?"

"The closest asteroid's changed orbit and will collide with the space-station... In about four minutes!"

Steve quickly found the hangar door controls and threw the switch. The massive door began to rise upwards. Just beyond Fireball Junior, the star-field was gradually becoming visible as an expanding glittering band, still bright despite the hangar lighting - but there was something else. Over to the left, obscuring a quarter of the entrance, hung the huge ominous bulk of an asteroid, and protruding from it the nose of the SS Thor was clearly visible. Steve could see that the ship was slowly getting closer as he watched.

"It's the Thor..." Steve told Matt, "...It must have pushed the asteroid off course when they merged!"

"Steve! When that asteroid hits, it'll smash the space-station like an egg - You've got three and a half minutes!"

"Matt, we haven't got Supercar loaded yet..."

"You'll have to leave it," Matt said urgently, "There's no time!"

"Mike," Steve called as he ran back to Supercar, "Get into Supercar fast!"

Mike hesitated, "But Colonel, I can't start the motors in vacuum..."

"Here," Steve said as he pushed Mike towards Supercar, "Take my communicator and leave it switched on - Matt can track your position."

Puzzled, Mike took the radio and hurriedly climbed into Supercar's cockpit.

"Strap yourself in. I'm getting you and Supercar out of harm's way."

Steve unbuckled his thruster pack and began securing it to the back of the cargo-sled. "Brace for a sudden acceleration and then just sit tight and wait for pick-up. Hang on to these..." Steve told Mike as he tossed him a small pouch, "Oxygen pills - the moment you start to feel cold, take another - right away."

Steve forced open the valves on the thruster-pack and threw himself clear as it flared into life and blasted at full power. Mike felt a kick in the back and was pressed hard into his seat as the sled shot across the deck, rapidly gaining speed as it streaked towards the open hangar door.

Steve raised himself up onto his elbows as he watched the sled come to an abrupt stop at the threshold - and Supercar and its passenger sped onwards, catapulted out into open space. Fireball Junior was about twenty yards away and there was now less than three minutes to get aboard and blast the ship clear of the base.

Steve ran back to the ship and with his heart pounding, was soon racing up the metal steps. Once inside the airlock he slammed the door closed and thumbed the button to pump in the air. He looked at his watch; he was running out of time. He gradually became aware of the hiss of air as it started to fill the airlock. There was nothing he could do until the air pressure equalized with the rest of the ship; only then could the inner door be opened.

"Come on... Come on..." Steve muttered helplessly as he watched the slowly moving needles on the gauges.

Out in space, Supercar was still moving steadily away from the doomed space-station. Inside the cockpit Mike felt no sensation of movement now that the acceleration had ceased. It seemed to him that Supercar was completely motionless, set in the middle of a star-studded globe of velvet blackness. There was no sound since there was no air to convey it. Mike released his safety harness and felt himself floating gently upwards. He hastily buckled the harness again as he lost his sense of up and down. There was a complete absence of gravity and his mind was unintentionally running through different possibilities. Was Supercar facing 'up' and 'down' was behind him? Was he right way up or was Supercar upside down? Mike closed his eyes and with an effort, he fought off the vertigo. All ideas relating to which way up he was were totally devoid of meaning. There was no 'up' or 'down' any more, there was just 'here' and 'there'.

He opened his eyes again. His arms were stretched out in front of him and had no inclination whatsoever to 'drop'. Once again he closed his eyes. "It's a bit like being underwater," he told himself. That seemed to help. He opened his eyes and tried to turn in his seat to see how far he was from the fake asteroid. A little reluctantly he released the harness fastenings and carefully turned his body around, clinging tightly to the seat straps.

The disguised space-station was clearly visible, looking like a dark and misshapen imitation of the Moon. A horizontal bar of light shone at its centre.

Mike used the size of the open hangar door to try to judge the distance he'd travelled. Off to the right loomed the irregular mass of the approaching asteroid, carrying the SS Thor and its crew on their final voyage home.

"Do you figure," Mike asked the shapeless foam-clad occupant of the passenger seat, "that a mile and a half is gonna be far enough from the impact?"

"Nope," Mike said after a short pause, "Me neither. And If Zodiac doesn't get himself out of there sometime very soon, he's a gonner for sure."

As Mike watched, the asteroid began to obscure the spies' base from view. The light from the huge, open doorway dimmed. Soon all he could see was the asteroid. "Any second now..." Mike told his silent passenger.

Suddenly the ragged outline of the asteroid became painfully bright, so bright that Mike had to shield his eyes from the glare. A loud burst of static erupted from the radio, still clutched in his hand. As Mike watched, the brightness slowly faded and the radio static died away, leaving nothing but an ominous silence...

16

Earth Bound...

With no gravitational forces or atmospheric friction to slow it, Supercar sped onward through the star-studded blackness of space. Although Supercar was still deep within a vast field of asteroids, the craft's relatively low velocity combined with the immense distances involved meant that it would take a very long time to reach any of them. The chances of collision were remote - but if nobody found him before his oxygen supply ran out, Mike Mercury knew he'd be just as dead - it would just happen more slowly. All he could do was sit at the currently useless controls and wait for the promised pick-up.

Aside from the stars, the only object that Mike could see was the slowly receding asteroid, almost directly behind Supercar, the asteroid which had just obliterated the space-station and possibly Colonel Steve Zodiac along with it...

Mike anxiously scanned the skies looking for Fireball Junior as he spoke urgently into the small radio that Steve had given him just before he'd blasted Supercar clear of the doomed base, "Supercar to Fireball XL5 - Colonel Zodiac? Can anyone hear me?"

There was no answer, but Mike thought he glimpsed a tiny glittering point of light not far from the jagged edge of the asteroid. He stared intently, not daring to take his eyes off the object in case it became lost from view. Was it a spacecraft or just tumbling debris thrown out by the explosion?

Suddenly Mike heard Colonel Zodiac's voice from the radio, "Fireball Junior to Supercar. Mike, I'll be right with you."

"Colonel! I didn't think you were going to make it!"

"Me neither - that was a close call... I'll bring Junior alongside and get you aboard."

As Mike watched, the tiny moving point of light slowly grew and resolved itself into the now familiar shape of Fireball Junior. But the familiar shape had become a little distorted by the explosion. Mike was shocked when he saw how scorched and battered Fireball Junior looked as it drew closer. One of the lower fins was torn and twisted and remnants of landing gear trailed underneath the ship. Evidently, Steve had only just made his escape in time.

Back in the main ship, Doctor Venus was writing her post-operative report, when she heard Steve radio in from Fireball Junior.

"Fireball Junior to XL5..."

The circuit clicked as Matt answered the call from the navigation bay, "Go ahead Steve."

"Mike's safely aboard, Matt and we've got Supercar in tow."

"I can see you on the Astroscope Steve - Junior sure took a pounding."

"Nothing Jock can't fix in a couple of days Matt. We can head for Earth as soon as Venus gives the word."

Venus hurried over to the wall intercom unit and joined the conversation, "Oh Steve! Thank goodness you and Mike are both all right. I'm all finished so we can return to Space City as soon as you get back."

As he sat in the control cabin of Fireball Junior Mike Mercury was forcing himself to come to terms with his situation - now that it seemed that the mission was drawing to a successful conclusion. In all the recent excitement and danger, he'd almost forgotten that he'd soon have to leave this world of the future, and return to his own time. Mike was eager to see Venus again, but he knew that the reunion would be short-lived. He'd soon be going home now - back to 1961 and she'd be out of his life forever. As he listened to Steve exchanging news with the Fireball crew over the radio, he began to feel very out of place. These people were a close knit team, they'd worked together for years. They were almost a family. Mike found his thoughts drifting back to Black Rock and the Supercar Team - his own team - where he knew he really belonged. But that was before he'd met Venus...

"All set?" Steve asked as he switched off the radio.

Mike looked up, "Oh, er yeah... All set Colonel."

"We'll be clear of the asteroids in about five minutes; the Professor has the course all figured. Then maybe you'd like to take over."

Mike blinked, "Take over?"

"Sure. I've been thinking about what you said earlier. You are an experienced test pilot - and I'm a qualified flight instructor..."

For Mike, the next five minutes passed very, very slowly.

As soon as the final asteroid was safely behind them Steve turned to Mike, "OK, see that gauge? That's our current velocity - SV1."

"How fast is that?"

"Pretty fast." Steve pointed to the central viewer, "Fireball is here, at position code four, one, five - Zero Red, range, four oh three, Zero Black - we'll rendezvous in about fifteen minutes."

"Yeah... I get it. You're not revealing any 'secrets'."

"No, but I can still let you fly the ship. Just don't tell anyone, OK?"

"You've got a deal Colonel." Not for the first time, Mike tried in vain to figure out how such a complex space ship could be operated with so few controls.

"There aren't many controls..."

"Just the ones you need. We've got computerized systems that do away with cluttered instrument panels. All available operations are selectable on the screen, along with navigational information and..."

Mike listened to his instructor with rapt attention.

"I thought you'd need a coffee..." Matt told Venus as he entered the medical lab.

Venus smiled as she took the proffered mug, "Oh Matt, thank you, I am feeling rather tired."

As Venus tried to lift the hot drink to her lips, her hand began to tremble. She hurriedly put the mug down on her desk. "I.... I'm a little shaky. I think I'll just go to my cabin to rest a while." Venus pointed to the file of papers on the desk, "Just in case Matt, my reports on the operation and my prognosis are all in this folder."

Matt looked worried, "In case of what?"

Venus glanced down at her hands, "Oh, just in case. We can't be too careful with our patient after all that's happened."

"OK Mike - fire the retros."

As Mike triggered the retro rockets, Fireball Junior smoothly slowed.

Steve grinned at his co-pilot, "Ok Mike, guess I'd better take over for the docking manoeuvre."

Mike smiled, "Ok Skipper, she's all yours - and thanks."

Steve waved a dismissive hand, "Just remember, I never allowed you to fly the ship, OK?"

"Ok Steve. But thanks all the same."

As soon as the docking operation was complete, Steve and Mike made their way back into the main ship.

They met Matt in the navigation bay. It was obvious that he was anxious about something. "Something wrong Matt?"

"Er, Venus wasn't feeling too good Steve, she's taking a nap in her cabin."

"Well, if she hadn't taken a rest, Matt, I'd have insisted. We just have to get Supercar into the cargo hold and then we'll get back to Space City."

"I'll take care of that Steve, Robert can give me a hand."

Steve left Mike in the lounge while he went to check on Venus.

He knocked on her door and waited.

There was no reply. Steve shrugged, "Guess she needs the sleep."

As he turned to go he started to feel uneasy.

He knocked the door again, "Venus? Are you OK?"

Steve thumbed the door button. The light was on and Steve saw that Venus was still wearing her uniform, apparently asleep on her bed.

"Venus? I just came to see if you were OK..."

Venus didn't stir.

Steve sat on the bed and gently shook her shoulders, "Venus?"

A crescent moon hung over Space City, all was quiet, except in the Zero residence...

Eleanor Zero lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. She wondered how long the noise had kept her awake. She sat up and turned to look at the bedside clock. "Just after four..." she sighed, "I'll have to wake him or I won't sleep a wink."

"Wilbur dear..." she said gently shaking her husband's shoulder, "Wilbur..."

The snoring continued unabated; Eleanor was about to give up when the telephone began to ring.

Commander Zero woke immediately, "What in space?" he grumbled, sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes.

"It's the telephone dear." Eleanor said brightly, before turning over and sinking into a grateful sleep.

"Zero here." the Commander snapped as he grabbed the telephone.

"Er... Very sorry to disturb you sir..." a nervous female voice apologised, "But you said to inform you if..."

As the Commander listened he suddenly became wide awake, "Zodiac? You've had word from Zodiac?"

"Yes sir, he reports mission accomplished and XL5 is heading back to Earth, but sir, there are casualties..."

Several days later, Mike Mercury was sitting waiting in the Space City hospital. A uniformed security guard stood nearby, doing his best to look

inconspicuous. Mike wondered if the guard was expecting him to make a bid for freedom by beating people about the head with the floral bouquet he'd bought for Venus. Everyone here was courteous and polite, but he still felt like a prisoner - or perhaps a valuable museum specimen.

Mike looked up as a young nurse approached.

"You may go in now Mister Mercury." she told him, "But no more than fifteen minutes please - Doctor Venus is still very tired."

Mike glared at the guard as the man began to follow him through the door. The guard studiously ignored the glare. But help was at hand, the nurse glared at the guard and this time he stopped in his tracks and turned to take up a position outside the door. The nurse smiled and winked at Mike as he slipped inside the room with his flowers.

Venus was sitting up in bed, "Hello Mike." she smiled, "Are those lovely flowers for me?"

Mike pulled up a chair beside the bed, "They most certainly are."

Venus accepted the proffered bouquet and studied them with interest, "Venusian Orchids! My favourites. And they are so beautiful."

"The store was fresh out of Mercurian forget-me-nots..."

Venus laughed, "Oh I don't need those Mike! I see you've got a new outfit."

"Er yes. You don't think it's too Flash Gordon?"

"Oh no Mike. You look a little more like Buck Rogers."

"They've sent our clothes off to the space-laundry so we'll be nice and smart for our trip home. The Doc's clothes need a good deal of repair work, and as for his shoes..."

Venus grinned, "Oh I expect they'll cobble something together."

"I'd have come earlier but..."

"I know Mike - they told me. I insisted they let me see you."

"The doctor said you'd been in a coma."

"Yes, I was told that too. I just feel like I've had a good long rest. I hope you haven't been worrying about me."

"What happened to you is our fault..."

"Good."

"Uh?"

"It's nice to know who I should blame for my own actions..."

"But if..."

"If is such a little word Mike. Let's not think about it. Nobody is to blame - and I'll be up and about again in a few days. We Venusians are actually quite hardy you know."

"Are you really a Venusian?"

Venus laughed again, "Oh, I'm human, but I was born on Venus. Long story..."

"I'd like to hear that story - when we have more time."

They looked at each other, both acutely aware that they were running out of time. Mike extended a hand to Venus, and she held it in hers.

Time passed.

Several days later, Doctor Venus was sitting waiting in her Space City office. She was gazing out of the window, watching the sun come and go as the tower endlessly rotated. Once again, Fireball XL5 drifted into view, set atop

the mile long launch rail, ready for tomorrow's mission. Venus extended a trembling finger and pressed the switch on the window frame. The ever-changing panoramic view of Space City immediately seemed to freeze as if the building had suddenly stopped turning. She stared down at the sleek silver spaceship that had almost been her home for the last few years. A tiny green jetmobile was gliding silently over the three hundred foot hull. It soon disappeared into the open roof hatch in Fireball Junior. Probably Matt, she thought. How she'd enjoyed learning to fly her own jetmobile. She remembered how Steve had been so impressed. Initially, he had seemed very reluctant to have her join the XL5 crew. She knew it was because of the dangers. Steve felt his job was to protect the vulnerable, and so it was. But it was her job too... Was her job. Now it wasn't.

There was a knock on the door, "Come in." Doctor Venus called absently. Mike Mercury and Doctor Beaker obediently entered. Mike looked anxious, "Venus... We heard that..."

"Oh please don't worry Mike," Venus said as she moved her chair back from her desk, "I'll be just fine in a few months." Venus's chair floated almost a foot from the floor as she steered it over to the other side of the office where there were several comfortable chairs beside a coffee table. "Please take a seat gentlemen."

Doctor Beaker watched with fascination, "That is an amazing, er, floating chair you have Doctor Venus. Quite remarkable."

Venus spun her hover-chair slowly around, as if showing off a new dress, "I'm glad you like it Doctor Beaker. It certainly is an improvement on old fashioned wheel-chairs."

"Gravity compensators?"

"Yes and a few micro thrust units." As her two visitors settled themselves down in their chairs, Venus lowered her own chair back to the floor and the

slight humming of the motors faded away. "I'm afraid I'm only a woman so I can't explain how it all works."

"Now you are teasing Doctor. I apologise for my curiosity."

Venus sighed, "I'm afraid you have both probably learned far too much already. That's why I want to talk to you. You have to forget all about us - all about the 21st century, otherwise..."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, we know. If the time-line gets messed up, then you might not exist and some other future will develop. Your Professor Matic has explained it to us. You can trust us to keep quiet - can't she Doc."

"Oh indeed Mike, quite so, quite so."

"I trust you both. But even so, knowing about the future may affect the way you think about things. You may make different decisions, hold different views. Any little change could affect your future and our present."

Mike frowned, "But you all agreed that you must send the Doc and I back to 1961 - alive."

"Oh yes of course. There is no doubt about that. You see we know from our data files that you lived for quite a few... Er, that is you have a lot to do back in the 1960's."

"And the 1970's?"

"I don't know Mike."

Mike had the distinct impression that Venus knew a good deal more than she was letting on, but he decided he'd best not put her under pressure, "OK, so what exactly do you want us to do in order to preserve this time-line thing?"

"With your permission gentlemen, I want to hypnotize each of you so that I can hide your recent memories."

Beaker looked startled, "Hypnotize??"

Mike exchanged a worried glance with Beaker and turned back to Venus, "But will that work?"

"Yes, I think so. I can give you post hypnotic suggestions that as soon as you arrive back in 1961 you will forget everything that happened after Masterspy fired the ray."

Mike was about to protest but Beaker put a hand on his arm, "Mike, we have no choice but to do as Doctor Venus asks. It's the least we can do."

Mike nodded and smiled, "Sorry Venus, it was just the thought of forgetting you. I see your point, When do you want to hypnotize us?"

"You know what they say, " Venus grinned, "There is no time like the present..."

The present soon becomes the past, and as the evening sun sank down towards the sea, a gentle breeze stirred the leaves of the palm trees beside Venus's home on Atello Beach, a few miles from the busy Space City spaceport. Venus sat in her lounge, gazing out at the blue ocean and watching the waves breaking on the sandy beach.

She didn't notice the sound of the approaching air-car - but Zoonie did. "Howdy... Howdy..." he crooned as he slid lazily off the sofa and padded over to the window.

Venus glanced at her watch, "Oh that will be Steve!" she said, hastily dabbing at her wet cheeks with a handkerchief, "Be a good boy and open the door."

Zoonie obediently trotted out into the hall and pressed the door switch. The door slid open. "Welcome... Ho-o-ome..." the lazoon announced to the visitor.

"Hi Zoonie. Is her Ladyship in?"

Zoonie looked up at Steve and reached out to grasp his hand in his big paws, "Follow me... Follow me..." the lazoona instructed as he led Steve into the lounge.

Venus smiled, "Hello Steve."

"Hi Venus. Say, you've got quite a butler here!"

"Isn't he just the cutest? I thought I wouldn't be able to cope with his antics but he's really doing his best to help me. Come and sit down Steve - you look worn out."

Steve sat down on the sofa beside Venus, "I've been helping Matt get all his equipment set up on Fireball - then I went to see Commander Zero."

"And?"

"He says it's Ok for you to come with us in Fireball tomorrow."

"That's really sweet of him Steve. I know he doesn't really think I'm fit for space duty."

"Speaking of your powers of persuasion, did our two passengers agree with your idea?"

"The hypnosis? Oh yes. I gave them the treatment this morning. I'm fairly confident it will work."

"Fairly?"

"There are few certainties in medicine Steve." Venus bit her lip, she was certain about her own medical condition.

Steve squeezed Venus's hand, "Venus, I made a decision..."

Venus turned to look up at him, "Oh?"

"I've asked to be reassigned - to ground duties."

"But Steve - flying is your life."

"No... It was my life. But since this'll be your last mission on Fireball, I'm making it my last mission too."

Venus frowned, "And what are you proposing to do? We both know I'll never walk again." Venus patted her useless legs, "The nerve damage is permanent."

"You took a dreadful risk with that drug."

"Steve, we all take dreadful risks all of the time, and there really was no choice. You can't give up Fireball. What would you do, stuck here on Earth?"

"That rather depends on your answer to a question..."

"And what question is that Steve?"



17

About Time

The stars shone brightly in the late evening sky as Steve Zodiac piloted his sleek yellow air-car towards Space City's launch area. Doctor Venus sat beside him, her head resting on his shoulder as she gazed up at the starry sky. The air-car drifted slowly along, several feet above the ground. There was no hurry. This was going to be their last mission together on Fireball XL5.

"Look Steve, there's Mars..." Venus was saying thoughtfully, "and down there, just above the horizon is Jupiter..."

"And?"

"It reminds me of the song, our song. Would you sing it for me now Steve? And don't give me that line about how you can't sing..."

Steve grinned, "Sure. We don't launch until Moon-rise, let's loop back around the island."

Half an hour later, Steve reduced altitude as the lighted windows of the control tower came into view, and beyond it, Fireball XL5 was waiting on the launch rail.

"Here they come." Commander Zero told Lieutenant Ninety as he watched from the control room windows, "They've just passed through the checkpoint and are heading for XL5."

The young Lieutenant joined the Commander at the window, "It's hard to believe sir."

"Yeah. This is the end of an era Lieutenant."

"Sir?" Ninety asked hesitantly, "Do you think the Colonel will regret his decision?"

Commander Zero shook his head, "No. He won't regret it. But I sure as heck do! The Space Patrol is losing its best crew!"

Professor Matic was waiting in Fireball XL5's open cargo bay. He waved as he saw Steve's car approaching.

Steve brought the car to a gentle landing beside Supercar, and cut the motors.

"Welcome aboard!" Matt said warmly. "Venus, I've, er, got your chair waiting, I'll bring it over..."

Venus sighed, "Oh... Thank you Matt. I'd almost forgotten..."

Steve gave Venus's hand a gentle squeeze, "That's OK Matt." he told the Professor. "I'll get it. Are our two passengers aboard?"

"Yes Steve, they're in the lounge."

"Brief them on the mission, Matt. Venus and I will do the pre-launch checks. We launch in one hour."

Professor Matic was deep in thought as he made his way back to Fireball's lounge. If his plan worked, Mercury and Beaker would be home tomorrow. No, that wasn't quite right. They'd just be 'gone'. They'd be part of the past again. Tomorrow they'd be dead. Matt paused as he tried to marshal his thoughts. Would they still be alive when they were 'back' in 1961? Were they going to their deaths or to their lives? Matt decided on the latter, though he still felt more than a little uneasy.

Doctor Beaker and Mike Mercury were engrossed in a discussion about time travel theory. Both men looked up as the Professor entered the lounge but he motioned for them to continue their talk while he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"So is all of history already mapped out?" Mike asked, "I mean, do we have any free will? Or has the future already been written for us?"

"There is a school of thought," Beaker replied, "that it may be possible to travel into the past, since the past has already happened. However, travelling into the future is deemed to be quite impossible, since, ah, it does not exist yet."

Mike shook his head, "I guess we've proved otherwise. What do you think Professor - does the future already exist? Haven't we just proved that it does?"

Matt settled himself down on the sofa, "As Albert Einstein said, It's all relative. I'd say you came from the past into the present. That's my perspective. From yours, you travelled from the present into the future. If you travelled back to 1861, to the people living then you'd be 'from the future' but you'd know they'd got that wrong, 'they' were living in the past not the present. All relative you see."

Mike nodded thoughtfully, "In a relative way, the Doc and I are dead and you Professor Matic, have not been born yet."

Matt stared down into the infinite depths of his hot coffee as he quietly replied, "Yup, all depends on your frame of reference right enough..."

The Professor adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat, "Ahem, Colonel Zodiac has asked me to brief you on the mission while he and Doctor Venus are doing system checks. We'll launch in about an hour and Steve is going to fly us, er, to a point in space that I've selected for your return journey through time back to 1961. While we're travelling you both need to get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow we'll be arriving at your departure point."

"Sounds OK so far" Mike nodded, "Then what happens Professor?"

"Well, we have to reverse the procedure which brought Supercar through time."

"I knew it!" Mike sighed, "Don't tell me. I have to fly Supercar backwards at 500 miles an hour while being un-shot at with some nutty ray gun?"

"Not exactly... but almost. Supercar will follow the same flight path as it did before being hit by the Chronotizer ray, but you'll have to start out in empty space, as the Earth's no longer where it was back in 1961."

"Is that why Supercar ended up way out near the Moon's orbit?"

"So far as I can figure. But fortunately for you, Supercar must have somehow been dragged along by the gravitational field of the Earth and Moon as it travelled through time." Matt took a sip of his coffee before continuing, "Doctor Beaker, that neutraliser gadget you constructed made Supercar immune to the time freezing effects of the Chronotizer. But since Supercar could not continue forwards through space due to the effects of the ray, it went forward in time only. We have to create a tunnel through space time to get you home."

"And how," Beaker asked, "will you create such a tunnel Professor?"

"That's where the neutroni jammer comes in. Neutroni radio is a crude form of time travel. The neutroni signal travels backwards in time in direct proportion to the distance it travels through space."

Mike frowned, "I thought your neutroni radio was instantaneous."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it. The practical side is that we can talk to people way out in space as if the signals travel instantly. But the scientific explanation is more complex. Neutroni signals actually travel in a straight line through space, but they take a negative amount of time to do that."

Beaker raised his eyebrows, "Negative?"

"Yes Doctor, neutroni signals behave in much the same way as old-time radio waves, but the time factor is reversed.

Mike nodded, "Colonel Zodiac said something about neutroni radio being impossible but you use it anyway."

Matt smiled, "Well we don't have the theory all figured out yet - but we do know how to make it work. There have been a lot of developments over the last fifty years and frankly, we are learning that Nature is a whole lot more complicated than anyone ever thought. Moving at the speed of light, it naturally takes neutronic radiation one year to travel a distance of one light year. But it's been tunnelling back in time as it travels through space. One year of travel through space takes it back one year in time. Neutroni normally has to travel in an absolutely straight path, so the effect is always that of simultaneous transmission and reception."

"If your neutroni could be made to follow a curved path," Beaker mused, "then might it be feasible to receive a signal before it is transmitted?"

"That's the trick, Doctor Beaker. It's the key to reversing the direction of time's arrow. The spies' jammer saved us a lot of, er, time. Y'see it deflects neutroni particles from their straight line course, scattering them randomly. I've been able to re-focus the neutroni effect into a tight spiral which will punch through the space-time continuum. It'll connect 'now' to 'then' just long enough to send you back."

"Back to 1961?"

"Yup."

"But Professor..." Beaker said worriedly, "Er, if Supercar goes back to the exact place and time where it was hit by the Chronotizer, will it not be struck again, and..?"

Matt nodded, "...and thus create an infinite loop in time where Supercar leaves 1961, arrives in the future, and then returns to 1961, gets shot by the ray again, ad infinitum." Matt smiled, "That's something I had to figure out. I don't know if an infinite loop like that is possible - but if it is, then we sure don't want to get stuck in one. Of course, we might already be in that loop, and I've already said this many times."

Beaker nodded, "What is your solution Professor?"

"Supercar will emerge into 1961 a little way behind, er, Supercar. By the time it gets within range of the Chronotizer, the ray won't be working."

"It won't?" Mike asked.

"Nope." the Professor told them, "I added a little more charge to that 'gizmo' of yours, Doctor Beaker. That's increased its range so that it will, er, neutralize the Chronotizer before it can be fired again."

"But my dear fellow there is still a problem to solve. I'm afraid we won't be able to operate Supercar's engines in a vacuum - unless of course, you've made a modification..."

"No Doctor, I could have modified your engine design but that would be too risky - you'd be bound to notice and figure out what I'd done."

Mike nodded, "And mess up the dratted time-line... So what do we do?"

"Fireball Junior will tow Supercar, accelerate to five hundred miles an hour and then detach her so she can pass through the tunnel."

Mike swallowed, "Ok Professor... Let me see if I've got this right. Supercar will appear back in 1961 at an altitude of 30,000 feet - and we won't have any power."

"Yes, that's the plan. You'll have to start Supercar's engines when you, er, hit the atmosphere."

Up in the control tower, Commander Zero carefully lit a cigarette as he stood gazing out of the window. The Moon was just rising above the distant mountains. He absently turned the empty cigarette packet over in his hand and glanced down at the long list of beneficial ingredients and health promoting properties.

Lieutenant Ninety looked up from his console, "All systems are 'go', sir."

"OK Ninety, clear Fireball XL5 for launch."

"Yes sir." Ninety turned to his radio, "Fireball XL5 - All systems read A-OK. You are clear to launch."

"Roger. Go XL5." Colonel Zodiac acknowledged.

As Commander Zero watched, two of the four launch sled rockets fired and Fireball XL5 began to move along the launch rail, slowly at first, but steadily gaining speed. The ship thundered down the rail and was soon soaring into the evening sky. Zero counted under his breath as the bright point of light climbed steadily on a brilliant, white vapour trail. "Five... four... three... two... one..."

From a mile away he heard the two remaining rockets on the booster sled fire, at almost the same instant as Fireball's main engine roared into life. The effect was like a sonic boom; Zero never tired of hearing that sound.

"Launch A-OK Commander." Ninety reported.

Returning to his desk, Zero stubbed out his cigarette, "Guess we can call it a day, Lieutenant."

18

Another Place, Another Time...

The following morning, or at least, about nine or so hours later, Doctor Beaker and Mike Mercury emerged from their well-appointed cabins and made their way down to the lounge.

"Do you smell cooking?" Mike asked, sniffing the air.

"Why yes Mike. I do believe it's bacon..."

Both men turned as they heard Doctor Venus's hover-chair emerging from the room opposite, "Good morning gentlemen," Venus greeted them brightly. "I hope you both slept well. If you'd like to come into my parlour, breakfast is nearly ready."

Somewhat puzzled, the two time travellers followed Venus through the open door.

Mike's mouth began to water, "I thought you just ate food pills on this ship."

"Oh, we can make exceptions for VIP guests. If you'd like to sit here Doctor Beaker, I'll bring you your grapefruit, followed by ham and eggs, then toast and marmalade"

"Sounds delicious." Mike said as he sat himself down opposite Beaker.

"For you Mike," Venus said sweetly, "A soft boiled egg and one slice of buttered toast."

"Uh? Have I put on too much weight?"

"Oh no Mike, You're still in fine shape, but I'm afraid you have to have the same breakfast that you had just before you left 1961; Professor Matic says it's all to do with time-line continuity."

"He does?"

"Yes." Venus nodded firmly.

"I'm sure the Professor is absolutely right." Beaker said approvingly as Venus brought over his first tray of food. "They certainly did provide a most excellent breakfast for the delegates."

While Doctor Beaker was wading through his full English breakfast, and Mike was tapping disconsolately at the shell of his boiled egg, Steve and Matt were preparing to initiate a sub-temporal anomaly in the space-time continuum.

In Fireball's control cabin, Steve reached out and flicked a switch, "Nosecone missile ready for firing, Professor. You all set back there?"

"All set Steve." Matt confirmed from the Navigation Bay. "The missile must detonate exactly on target."

"Yeah. This toy of yours cost more than a Fireball. The Commander will have our heads if this doesn't work."

Matt wiped the sweat from his brow and firmly crossed his fingers, "It'll work Steve. Set the missile trajectory to course code one, one, five Zero Green. Detonation three oh four Zero Black."

"Roger Matt. Missile trajectory; one, one, five Zero Green. Detonation point; three oh four, Zero Black."

Matt carefully double-checked the columns of data on his monitor screen. "Acknowledged. Commencing ten second count-down. Ten... Nine..."

Steve turned to Robert, "Maintain free-float. Standby to track missile."

The Colonel's finger hovered over the firing button as the count-down continued.

“...Three... Two... One... Zero and Go!”

There was a slight vibration as Steve launched the missile. It streaked away from the ship and was soon lost from sight. On the central viewer a bright white arrow head moved slowly towards a red cross-hair. Time passed, and Steve realized he was holding his breath.

“Five seconds to detonation....” he announced, “Two... One...”

Steve shielded his eyes with a hand as a brilliant burst of electric-blue light flared in front of the ship and expanded like a ball of magical fire - and then abruptly vanished.

“It worked!!!” Matt shouted, “It worked!!!”

“I don’t see anything out there now Matt, just stars...”

“Just keep your eyes on that spot where the missile exploded Steve...”

As Steve watched, the stars directly ahead became gradually fainter as the black backdrop of space grew steadily brighter, as if it were the break of dawn.

The brightness took on a blue hue, as if a shimmering blue lake was forming in open space.

“There,” Doctor Venus smiled as she removed the hypodermic needle from Mike’s arm, “I told you it wouldn’t hurt.”

“Yeah, “ Mike agreed wincing and rubbing his arm, “You did...”

“That shot will cushion your body from the effects of the sudden deceleration when Supercar hits the atmosphere.” Venus glanced at the wall clock, “I guess you’d better go and join Doctor Beaker in the lounge Mike. The Professor will be along shortly to take you to Supercar.”

Mike rolled down his shirt sleeve and pulled on his jacket, He wanted to say so much, but there was no time. He pulled up a chair and sat beside Venus. "Venus... I guess this is goodbye, but it's good to know I'm leaving you in safe hands."

Venus gave Mike a hug and kissed him, "Let's not say goodbye, let's make it au revoir, Mike."

A nervous cough made them both turn their heads. Professor Matic was standing in the doorway, "Er, sorry if I interrupted. Er... We're ready to proceed with the launch."

Mike kissed Venus, "Au revoir Venus." Then he followed the Professor out into the corridor.

Venus watched him go, "Another time, another place..." she whispered softly.

Doctor Beaker was waiting in the the lounge, "Mike! Come and look at this - it's quite amazing!"

Mike joined his friend at the panoramic windows, "Is that really sky?"

"Professor Matic tells me that it was sky, when the Earth was here back in 1961."

Mike turned to Matt, who was grinning like a proud father, "So, what is it now?"

"It isn't 'now'", Matt told him, "You are looking through a hole in space-time to what was."

"And we fly Supercar through that hole and become 'was' instead of 'is'?"

Matt nodded, "but don't forget, Mike, it's all relative. 'Was' from my point of view, but 'is' from yours. From the other side of that tunnel, 2064 is just a 'maybe'."

As the three men watched, the patch of sky brightened even more, becoming almost painfully bright against the surrounding darkness, "That's 2:06 pm give or take about one second."

"Astonishing." Beaker declared, "Will the time change while we make our, ah, preparations?"

Matt shook his head. "No Doctor, this is the exact spot in space where the Earth was, 10 seconds before Supercar was struck by the ray. We are looking at an instant in time, like a frame on a reel of old fashioned movie film. To access other times we'd have to move to different locations to be where the Earth was at those times."

"Did you figure this out yourself?" Mike asked.

"Only the theory. The Space City computers calculated the exact location."

Twenty minutes later Steve and Matt were detaching Fireball Junior. Steve fired the retros and brought Junior to a halt a little way in front of the main ship and then spoke into the radio, "OK Robert, maintain free-float."

"Maintain free-float," the robot replied from Central Control.

"Port cargo bay depressurized." Venus reported from her console in the Navigation Bay. "Medical telemetry reads A-OK for Supercar crew."

"Roger Venus." Steve acknowledged.

Steve fired Junior's retros again, moving the craft slowly backwards towards the cargo bay. Once alongside he swung Junior around to face away from the main ship at a right angle and then locked the ship into free-float. Directly ahead of them Steve and Matt could once again see the patch of blue sky.

"Robert, open the port bay door."

"Roger." The robot responded, "Open port bay door."

Mike and Doctor Beaker sat in Supercar, watching as Professor Matic approached, pulling the tow-cable along behind him.

"It's simply astonishing Mike. No space-suit; just an, er, oxygen pill."

"Yeah, and if the canopy seals fail we'll be real glad we swallowed ours."

Once he had reached the cargo bay, Matt tapped on Supercar's transparent canopy and grinned amiably before connecting the magnetic clamp of the cable to the underside of Supercar. "All set in there?"

Mike smiled and nodded, "All set Professor."

"Have a good trip!" Matt gave a final wave before leaving the cargo bay.

Beaker watched him go, "How can sound waves possibly travel in a vacuum?"

"You heard the Professor, Doc. Nature is more complicated than we thought."

"Quite so Mike. Quite so."

Soon Fireball Junior was moving slowly away from the main ship with Supercar in tow. Junior began to smoothly accelerate until both craft were travelling at just over 500mph.

Mike and Beaker were now experiencing weightlessness in Supercar's cockpit.

Doctor Beaker took a pencil from his pocket and then released it in front of his face. It didn't move. "Remarkable, quite remarkable." As he spoke, his breath started the pencil moving, it rotated gracefully until he reached out and retrieved it, putting it back in his pocket.

"Are you two OK in there?" Steve asked over Supercar's radio.

"A-OK" Mike affirmed.

"Time to switch on that neutralizer gadget of yours, Doctor Beaker. I'm releasing Supercar from the tow-line now."

There was a dull scraping noise as the cable lost its magnetic grip on Supercar.

"Cable detached. Winching it in now."

"Nice work Steve, " Matt said from the main ship, "Supercar's course and speed are A-OK. The neutralizer is active and at full power. Thirty seconds to temporal transition window."

Venus sat in her hover-chair next to Matt's console. She spoke calmly into the radio, "Supercar cabin temperature and air pressure at optimum. Crew heart rate and blood-pressure well within tolerance levels. Good luck gentlemen."

Once Steve had winched in the tow cable he brought Junior around in a tight arc and circled back to fly alongside Supercar.

Mike nudged Beaker when he saw Fireball Junior coming up alongside, they both waved.

"You are doing fine." Steve told them, "Soon you'll be hitting the atmosphere so brace yourselves for the jolt. "I have to clear the area now - goodbye and good luck to you both."

"Goodbye Colonel." Beaker called back as he gave a final wave.

"Bye' Colonel - thanks for everything."

"Guess this is it Doc..." Mike said as they watched Fireball Junior dive away.

As the two men sat and watched, the patch of blue Nevada sky seemed to be rushing towards them, rapidly expanding in size.

"Do you suppose Mike," Beaker mused, "That this is how Dorothy felt..."

"...Just before the tornado hi..."

There was a sudden jolt...



19

Living In the Past

In Fireball XL5's navigation bay, Doctor Venus was carefully watching her medical readouts as Supercar plunged towards the distant patch of shimmering blue sky.

"Five seconds to transition..." Matt reported from beside her at his console, "Three... Two... One!"

Venus tensed as the life indicators suddenly winked out.

Her eyes misted over as she heard herself saying "All life indicators at zero."

"Dead." Venus told herself, "Dead and gone."

Matt's voice seemed to be coming from a long way off, "Gone." he seemed to be saying.

She shook herself, "No life indicators." she repeated, in what she hoped was a calm professional tone. She rubbed her eyes.

"Venus!" Professor Matic exclaimed as he turned to face her, "It's gone! Vanished clear off the astroscope!"

"Gone..." her mind echoed the Professor's words.

"Venus?" Matt asked worriedly when he saw how sad she looked.

"Oh... Well done Professor!"

Before Matt could reply, Steve's startled voice cut in from the intercom, "Professor! I don't get it - it just vanished!"

"But..." Venus began, "Wasn't that supposed..."

She glanced around in confusion. Her hover-chair was gone. She moved her legs experimentally before unsteadily standing up, using the console for support.

"Venus?" Matt said, looking at her with concern, "What's wrong?"

"Oh... I'm all right Matt... I think..." Venus said, slumping back down in her seat.

Commander Zero's voice bellowed from the radio, "What is going on up there Zodiac?"

Venus heard Steve reply, "Commander, it just vanished."

"Vanished? Well what in space was it? Did you see it?"

Matt frowned as he spoke into the intercom, "Couldn't get a fix Commander, it was gone before we could calibrate the instruments. I'd guess it was just some kind of freak neutroni distortion."

"OK, Professor. Panic over. Get that ship back down here Steve."

Venus looked up as she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"You look like you've just seen a ghost." Matt said softly.

"We... We were just looking for the unidentified object weren't we?" Venus asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Matt frowned and nodded, "But it was a false alarm."

"There was a craft out there Professor. I know there was."

"Female intuition?"

"No, we all saw it. It was from the past and..."

"I guess you must have blacked out for a second..."

"This is over two weeks ago... Lots of things have happened. Oh Matt, don't you remember? We had to send Supercar back..."

"Supercar? I'm sorry Venus. I guess you had some kinda dream when you..."

"But I didn't black out." Venus glanced down at her left hand in dismay as she realized she was no longer wearing a ring - a ring that had meant so much. She stood up and stretched her legs, "I suppose you think I'm acting like a toot."

Matt shook his head, "I've seen some pretty strange things happen Venus and I don't think it pays to make rash assumptions as to what's possible and what isn't. We'll talk about this when we get back - but I think it's best the Commander isn't informed - not until we've had time to think this through."

Erstwhile, over a hundred years earlier, at Black Rock Lab, young Jimmy Gibson watched the small flashing green light on the console monitor that showed Supercar's position high over the Nevada desert. The light began to move steadily down the screen as Supercar dived. The screen flickered and Jimmy hurried to adjust the controls. A second light had appeared on the screen at a higher altitude - a red light.

As Jimmy watched it began to drop rapidly and then the green indicator light went out.

"Jimmy!" Professor Popkiss called urgently over the radio. "Are you zere?"

"Professor... Supercar..."

"Listen to me Jimmy. Supercar's engines have failed - it's out of control and I cannot get a response from Mike. You must try to fire the engines from your console - boost the console power to maximum and try the emergency restart without Interlock. Now Jimmy!!"

Over at the conference centre Professor Popkiss worriedly stared at his instruments as Supercar continued to plummet Earthwards.

Jimmy quickly turned a dial and threw two switches on the main console. A second later the red light on the display turned green.

“Good work Jimmy.” Popkiss called when he saw that Supercar’s engines had fired. “That’s all we can do. Something is interfering with our transmissions, it must be Doctor Beaker’s Chrono-neutralizer. If Mike doesn’t pull Supercar out of that dive soon...”

Mike woke abruptly as Supercar’s engines suddenly roared into life. He took in the situation in an instant.

“Doc! Wake up!” he shouted urgently as he struggled with Supercar’s controls.

“Wh... what?” Doctor Beaker glanced around the cockpit in astonishment. “Mike - we are in a power dive!”

“Yeah - I’d kinda noticed that...”

“Pull up!”

“I am pulling up Doc - but unfortunately Supercar isn’t....”

For several long tense seconds Mike continued his fight to bring Supercar out of its death dive. “Come on Supercar... Come on...” he urged through clenched teeth, as the ground raced up to meet them.

Suddenly, Supercar shuddered as she began to respond to the controls.

“Okay...okay... the nose is coming up Doc... We’re going to make it!”

Mike quickly brought Supercar onto a level course.

He glanced over at Beaker, “What’s that box for Doc?”

"I, er, that is, I don't really know. I seem to have dozed off and I'm a rather confused. I must confess I don't know how I came to be here. Where are we Mike?"

"Guess I'm in the same boat Doctor. We must've both blacked out in that power dive. Mike looked around trying to get his bearings. "I'd say we were out over the desert someplace. Look, I think there's a road down there, did you see a truck?"

Far behind them there was a bright orange flash, then an explosive sound followed by thick black smoke.

"Doc, if you don't have a use for that box of yours, could you please switch it off? That high pitched whine is driving me nuts."

"Ah... yes." Beaker studied the device and soon found the off switch.

Professor Popkiss's anxious voice immediately burst from the radio, "Mike! Mike can you hear me?"

"Hello Professor." Mike replied easing himself back in his seat and flexing his whitened knuckles. "I hear you..."

"Mike... we were worried down here. Are you and Beaker ok?"

"We were a little concerned up here too Professor. I don't know what's going on, but Doctor Beaker and I are both fine now."

"Jimmy and I were tracking you Mike. You must have blacked out when Supercar's engines failed. You still destroyed the Chronotizer though. Well done Mike, Doctor Beaker. Mission accomplished!"

Mike turned to Beaker, "We destroyed the what....?"

"I don't know Mike, but whatever it was, it appears to be a good thing that it isn't anymore."

"Masterspy..."

"Yes Zarin?"

"Supercar - it came back... Supercar came back..."

"Yes... it did...." Confirmed Masterspy emphatically.

Zarin dropped the rather useless black smouldering steering wheel he was holding and he and Masterspy stepped gingerly out of the wreckage of what had been a truck only a few seconds earlier.

Masterspy attempted to brush soot from his still smoking clothes but soon gave up. He gestured to Zarin, "Come Zarin! It is a long way back to civilisation."

They set off on their long walk, both men looking a trifle scorched.

Many years later, the sun was just dipping down into the Pacific Ocean as Venus sat talking with Steve and Matt at her home on Atello Beach.

The two men listened attentively as Venus told them all, or almost all, that she could remember about her 'lost few weeks'.

"I just don't know what to say Venus," Steve said carefully, "You seem to have had quite a dream."

Venus glared, "Dream?"

"Remember that time you had a vivid daydream that we were all involved in a circus?"

"Now hold on." said Matt. "I've always wondered about that circus 'daydream'."

"But I was just dozing Matt," Venus sighed. "I was thinking about Steve's family's circus background and staring into that old crystal ball..."

"That just happens to have belonged," Matt pointed out, "To one of the greatest clairvoyants of all time - Madame Clara Zodiac."

"Are you suggesting that I'm clairvoyant?"

"I think you may be."

"But..."

"Now Venus, as a fellow scientist you know darn well that the Universe is full of unexplained phenomena. I think you may be psychic."

"Matt, are you saying Venus had a vision of the future?"

"I think that psychic ability may explain why Venus remembers things that you and I don't."

"Thank you Professor. I'm glad someone around here believes me."

"Hold on Venus," Steve protested, "I believe you... It's just that..."

"Just that you don't believe me?"

"Now now..." Matt said firmly, "We've all been through some pretty weird situations in our line of work."

Steve frowned, "You mean you think time was tampered with?"

"Could be it was... And we put it right again, just like Venus said."

"Steve!" Venus said hurriedly, "That would mean that Boris and Grizelda really do have a secret base out there!"

"I guess so. But where precisely is it? If we could find the base it would prove that you... er prove that you..."

"Prove that I'm right?"

"Yeah. But how can we find it?"

"There was a yellow star and that horrid green planet..."

"Can't say that narrows things down much." Matt sighed, "And you say it was about a day's travel time from Earth?"

"Yes."

"What speed?" Steve wanted to know, "What course?"

"I don't know Steve... I was in the lounge for most of the trip..."

Steve shrugged, "I guess that fake asteroid could be in any one of a thousand star systems. Without knowing a course or a speed it would be hopeless searching."

"I suppose you are right." Venus said, as she gathered up the empty coffee cups, "Professor..."

"Yes Venus?"

"Do you suppose you'll ever rebuild that time machine of yours?"

Matt grinned, "Yeah, I guess I will - when I can find the time..."

Steve followed Venus into the kitchen, "Er Venus, I was wondering if you'd like to go to the movies on Saturday?"

"Oh Steve, that's very sweet of you but I remember that Commander Zero is going to ask me to baby-sit Jonathon Zero Junior.

"He is?"

"Yes Steve. And what's more, the Commander will be giving me the biggest box of Martian Delights you ever saw!"

It wasn't hard for Venus to persuade Professor Matic to look after Zoonie while she went over to the Zero's apartment to baby-sit young Jonathon. Venus had long since realised that Matthew Matic and Zoonie were two of a kind. She'd left the two of them happily playing together in Fireball.

After Commander Zero and Eleanor had left for the mainland, Venus flopped down on a sofa beside Jonathon. "Well, what would you like to do? Watch TV?"

Jonathon grimaced, "Aw, it's all just crummy Martian soaps and stupid ball games." The boy's face brightened, "I'd rather hear another space story Doctor Venus? Like the one with the Space Pirates?"

"Well I could tell you a story about Fireball XL5 and a kind of time machine called Supercar."

"Supercar? You mean the one in my book?"

"Which book is that Jonathon?"

"I'll go get it." Jonathon went to his bedroom and pulled a book down from his well-stocked bookshelf. Hurrying back to Venus he handed the book to her, "Here it is - It's a bit old-timey but I sure wish Pop had a car like Supercar."

Venus felt her heart miss a beat as she stared at the book's cover in disbelief.

"Doctor Venus?" Jonathon asked a little nervously as he noticed how pale she suddenly looked.

"Yes..." she half whispered as she began to turn the pages of the book, "That's the Supercar in my story..."

Epilogue

After a good night's sleep Mike Mercury and Doctor Beaker awoke on Saturday morning feeling none the worse for their adventures. Over a late breakfast the Supercar team were discussing their encounter with Masterspy.

"Vell it seems zat you both just had a temporary case of amnesia."

Mike nodded, "Guess so Professor - We saw that ray and then must have blacked out. I remember everything clearly now - at least I think I do.."

Beaker seemed more than a little preoccupied, "I would say that we got off rather lightly, considering the, ah, gravity of the situation." He eyed the fruit bowl thoughtfully and selected a large apple.

Everyone had finished eating and Mike began collecting up the empty plates.

"I guess that Chronotizer device was some sort of paralyzing ray - dangerous, but not so special."

"Most certainly Mike. Mark my words. The temporal continuum is impervious to, ah, tampering at any level."

"Quite so." Popkiss laughed as he headed for the lounge, "Still, I expect ve'll have to go to some more boring lectures once Doctor Samuels has built his replacement."

"Most certainly Popkiss..." Beaker was dropping his apple repeatedly on the table and studying the motion with an expression of curious fascination, "...Though I could think of better ways to spend my, er, time."

Mike glanced in his direction, "Careful with that apple Doc - you'll have Mitch steal it."

Jimmy called from the lounge, "Don't worry, Mitch is watching TV with me and the Professor. We're gonna watch my favourite show."

"Oh?" Mike called from the kitchen, "What's that?"

"It's all about space adventures Mike."

Mike paused as he washed the dishes.

Professor Popkiss put his head round the door, "Maybe you'd like it Mike. It's quite intriguing - all done with marionettes."

When Mike had finished the washing-up he flopped down on the sofa next to Jimmy and Popkiss.

"So this is some kind of puppet show?"

"Oh yes - and very vell done. I zink it is a British production. The spacecraft has a crew of three."

"Don't forget the robot!" Jimmy told him.

"Oh, and a robot too," Popkiss chuckled, "though I prefer the blonde girl."

Mike rubbed his forehead. "Blonde girl?"

"A Venusian actually. You'll see Mike, There may be more to Venus than we think..."

Mike put his head in his hands as he remembered some very odd dreams..

"Mike? Are you OK?"

"Er yeah, sure Prof. I think I'd better take a look at this TV show - it sounds interesting."

"You'll like the flying bikes Mike - Gee I wish the Professor and Doctor Beaker could build me one..."

Mike blinked, "Flying bikes?" he murmured to himself.

Mike sat transfixed as he watched the opening scenes of the TV show. Somehow it wasn't quite what he felt he had been expecting.

The telephone began to ring and Mike started to get up.

"No Mike," Popkiss told him, "Go ahead and watch Planet Patrol, I'll see to it."

"Isn't that a great looking spaceship?" Jimmy said as he watched the screen with awe.

Mike stared, trying in vain to figure out why he thought things were not quite right. "I guess I was expecting something different..." he muttered.

"That's a Galasphere Mike." Jimmy explained reverently, "It can travel anywhere in the Solar System!"

"Mike!" Popkiss called as he came back into the room, "It's for you."

Mike sighed and walked to the door, "Who is it?"

Popkiss smiled knowingly, "She didn't say Mike, but she has a most charming continental accent..."

The End