

THE FASTEST GUY ALIVE

A Fireball XL5 prequel story

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PART ONE

2052 AD

Some five hundred million miles from the Sun, a small insect-like spacecraft moved silently against the backdrop of distant stars. Set here and there in the stubby steel-grey hull were rounded turrets and clusters of manipulator arms. The craft had been designed with purpose in mind rather than artistic merit. The vehicle slowed and began to manoeuvre, its thrusters firing in sequence causing it to roll slowly and purposefully in order to line up with its target.

"That's it. Perfect. Hold it right there."

"But Mister Buckham," the pilot protested nervously, "I really don't like this. We shouldn't be here - we don't have authorization..."

"In my job sir, " Reginald Buckham responded coldly, "I have to take calculated risks. You're being well paid."

"That's all very fine Mister Buckham, but if I lose my pilot's licence..."

"You won't. You're working for the EBC. I'm taking full responsibility. Now pipe down and just keep this pile of junk steady. This won't take us long."

Buckam felt rather nervous himself, although he'd be the last to admit it. He left his unhappy pilot at the flight controls and clambered up a short ladder to where his partner sat beneath a large clear observation bubble.

"Just look at that view Reg... its spectacular!"

"Yeah, very pretty Carl. All set?"

"All set boss. This'll be a piece of cake."

"Is that the ship we want? Over there by the space station?"

"Sure Reg, that's Explorer. She's mostly hidden by that servicing cage but I think from this angle we might even see the guy inside."

Buckham settled himself down in a seat next to his partner and attached a small microphone to his shirt pocket.

"Ok Carl, I want you to start with a panoramic of that planet out there..."

"Jupiter," the pilot muttered tersely from down below.

"Yeah, whatever. Do a panoramic of that planet and then I want a sweep past the station and a slow zoom on the Explorer - Ok Carl?"

"Ok. Everything's set up."

"Great, we'll do this take live, don't think we have much time... Ready?"

"Ready."

Buckham pulled a hastily drafted script from his pocket and spoke briefly into his microphone. After a short delay a green light on the microphone signalled he was on the air.

"This is Reginald Buckham, talking to you direct from... Jupiter.

That's the big multi-coloured globe you see hanging there, almost filling the entire view. I can tell you folks at home that Jupiter is big - real big. We're about a quarter of a million miles out from Jupiter even though it looks really close. That planet is as far away from our ship as the Moon is from Earth - but Jupiter is over 40 times the diameter of the Moon." Buckham pushed his notes back into a pocket, "Ok, if you've ever been out of the Solar system, then you've probably travelled out from Jupiter Station, there she is just coming into view. The Grand Central of the Solar System. That's where all those beautiful interstellar liners dock to transfer passengers and take on fuel. Today of course, the scheduled flight is something rather special - Explorer 10 with its brave pilot Major J. T. Ireland. There she is ladies and gentlemen, the ship that's going to chart unknown worlds and perhaps discover new civilisations."

The camera was now zooming in on the Explorer spacecraft, which floated silently in space surrounded by a geometric framework of girders that served as the launch gantry.

"That ship is about 700 feet long and it comprises two modules. From this angle you can see the aircraft-shaped Planetary Exploration Module. The PEM is a self-contained and detachable winged vehicle which is designed for low level planetary reconnaissance and landings. As well as all the flight controls and computers it contains Major Ireland's cryogenic sleep chamber. The second stage of the ship houses the massive rocket motors, fuel and supplies for this decade-long mission. Take a look at those engines. There are nine of them, and they'll make this ship travel faster than anything that we've seen before. As you know viewers..."

Buckham's pilot appeared at the bottom of the ladder and waved anxiously to get attention.

"Just a moment folks..." Buckham clicked off his microphone. "What now?"

"Mister Buckham we're being warned off, I knew this would happen."

Carl pointed at the starscape above them, "That's a patrol ship heading this way Reg. Looks kinda mean too."

"OK. Ok. Tell them we're very sorry and do whatever they say. We got our pictures. What a scoop!"

The pilot hurried back to the controls as Buckham activated his microphone again, "Well folks. It looks like we have company."

Carl panned his camera to the right and a small white spacecraft came into view, rapidly growing in size.

"It seems we're being asked to move. The craft you now see is a World Space Patrol light patrol ship. We sure don't want to step on the toes of that fine organization."

The small craft containing Reginald Buckham and his intrepid crew was soon heading out of the area and making good speed.

Satisfied, the young WSP pilot swung his patrol ship around in a rather showy combination loop-the-loop and barrel roll and headed back to Jupiter Station.

Once his ship was safely stowed and post-flight formalities had been duly completed the young man made his way towards the station's recreation area, pausing briefly to smooth the broad padded red lapels that identified him as an Astronaut of the World Space Patrol. As he turned a corner he spotted a familiar face, "Hey Steve!"

A lieutenant in his early twenties with close cropped blonde hair looked up in surprise, "Ross! What in space are you doing here?"

"Oh, I heard they were doing this big deal space launch and there'd be all the TV networks here, so I kinda figured they'd need a handsome spaceman to film."

"Oh sure Ross..." said Lieutenant Steve Zodiac. "So what's the real reason?"

Ross shrugged, "I was drafted in for sheep dog duty. The whole Jovian system is swarming with the press. Gotta keep their ships from getting in the way."

"Yeah, it's a real circus. They've even got remote cameras in the control centre. Guess they should get some real good shots of my back as I sit there pressing buttons."

"So how come you're still a back-room boy and not a real spaceman? You won your wings before I did. " said Ross.

"The Colonel says I've still got stuff to learn about here."

"Sore point uh? Too bad, I guess you'll make it one day. We can't all be fast tracking high fliers."

Steve sighed, "No Ross, I guess not. Are you still flying those clumsy old fuel tankers round the Solar System?"

"Touché Steve," Ross grinned, "I guess we'll both get decent ships one day. I'll catch you later, be here for a few days. I gotta go and pose for the cameras."

"Uh?"

"Yeah... I'm gonna be a star. I bumped into Pat Dillinger, you know, the IPN TV presenter."

"No, never heard of him."

"What universe are you living in Steve?"

"I don't watch Interplanetary - they have such lousy sports coverage - not to mention those awful Martian soaps!"

"Guess I'll have to educate you then. Pat Dillinger isn't a 'him' she's a 'her'. She's a real stunner. IPN's top TV presenter, great looking and brains too."

"Since when were you interested in a girl's mental prowess Ross?"

"Oh, I just threw in that little detail to make you jealous, I know you go for the brainy type."

"So what's this wonder-girl celebrity want with a guy like you?"

"I guess she was taken by my good looks and wants to get some footage of a tough, handsome spaceman."

"You are a Grade A Toot Ross."

"Go curl your epaulettes!" Ross grinned as he sauntered away.

Steve looked at his watch. He'd just have time to put in his call to Earth before he reported to the main control room.

He made his way over to the nearest comm booth and keyed in the call code for Professor Matthew Matic at Universe University. The screen displayed a 'Please Wait' message - all the neutroni channels were busy.

Steve sat and waited, collecting his thoughts. This was the big day. At least it was the big day for his friend Jim.

The previous evening they'd shared a few drinks and talked about the past and the future, their hopes and fears.

"Guess I'm gonna miss you, old buddy."

Jim had laughed, "Not so much of the 'old' if you don't mind young Zodiac."

"Ten years is a long time Jim."

"I guess it depends how you fill your time. I've got a lot to do between now and 2062 - and so have you."

"Me? I'm stuck here on Jupiter Station. You're the one who's going on the Great Adventure."

"Life, young Zodiac, is a Great Adventure. You get back what you put in."

"If you get the breaks...." Steve added, with more than a little frustration.

"You make your own breaks Steve. You know that. You work hard, you get knocked back, you work even harder, you make sure those breaks happen. By the time I get back I reckon you'll be married and raising a family."

"Me? Oh no. I enjoy my freedom."

Jim grinned, "Y'know, that's exactly what Wilbur Zero said to me about six years ago, and now..."

"I should be going with you Jim. This isn't the kind of mission that should be performed alone."

"No." Jim said firmly. "This is a mission for one man. You'll have to trust me on that one Steve. You aren't jealous are you?"

"Jealous? Me? Yeah, I'm jealous. But I know they picked the right man for the job. I'm still just a junior around here. All the same, I wish I was going with you. Who knows what you might find out there?"

"Yeah, new worlds and civilisations - I'll send you a postcard." Jim had grinned. "Now I'm going to hit the sack, my big day tomorrow..."

So here it was - the big day.

A soft beep from the communication console informed Steve that his call had been connected. Matt's beaming face appeared on the video screen.

"Hi Steve! I've been waiting for your call."

"Hi Professor. You all set to watch the launch?"

"I sure am Steve, I've been watching the preparations on the EBC. They're getting some real good pictures of Explorer. Guess I'll switch to IPN for the actual launch though, Pat Dillinger's covering that. Say Steve, she's supposed to be on Jupiter Station, have you seen her?"

"I hadn't even heard of her until a few minutes ago. "

"Well she knows her science, which is more than I can say for old Reggie on EBC. There's been a lot of speculation in the papers about the 'Lost Worlds' and what the Major is likely to find out there."

"Yeah, seems odd to have worlds so close to our own Solar System but so difficult to reach," said Steve.

"Over nine hundred colonists went out there Steve, back in the days before the Anderson Hyper Drive. It's about time we found out what happened to them."

"Maybe they all value their secluded lives." Steve smiled, "With no neutroni transmissions possible they're really on their own - if they survived."

"Say Steve, speaking of survival, how are you getting on with the Colonel now? Are things any better?"

"Worse. I just can't seem to do anything right in his book. He doesn't rate me at all."

Matt nodded and smiled. "Good. "

"Good?"

"Yeah, hang in there Steve. If the Colonel is making your life hell, he's doing it for a good reason."

"Sure... Hey, I really have to go now - I'll talk to you after the launch."

Steve closed the video link and hurried to the elevator and thumbed the 'call' button. After a few moments the elevator doors opened and a young woman - a civilian - stepped out, "Well hello there..." She smiled warmly as she caught his eye.

"Er... Hi" Steve answered politely as he attempted to get past her to enter the waiting elevator.

"Are you an astronaut?" the girl asked as she looked Steve up and down.

"No, I'm just a back-room boy."

"Oh? I think we can use you..."

"Sorry Miss, I have work to do."

Steve hurried into the elevator and the doors closed.

"What do you suppose is eating him?" the girl asked a passing technician.

"Eating the Lieutenant, Miss? Probably the Colonel. They say his bite is worse than his bark."

"Really?"

"Oh aye. He'll most probably start by chewin' off the poor laddie's ears - but don't quote me "

"Hey, I'm with IPN not the EBC, I won't tell. I think you'd look good on camera - can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Aye, that I can."

"Great! Hey, you're Scotch aren't you?"

"Och! Women!" the technician muttered under his breath.

"Beg pardon?"

"I'm no' scotch; that's what I drink - Scottish is what I am."

"Oh...I see."

"I doubt it." the technician sighed ruefully, "But about this filming. I've got a good set o' bagpipes if you'd like to hear them."

Steve entered his pass code and the elevator doors opened onto the station's main control centre. There were dozens of people sitting at consoles all around the circular perimeter of the room, beneath the huge observation windows.

Steve ignored the television cameras which hovered quietly near the ceiling and made his way to his own console.

"Cutting a bit fine aren't you?" a lieutenant whispered as he got up to let Steve take his seat.

"How's it going Paul?" Steve asked as he sat down and studied the readouts.

"Like clockwork so far. I'm going down to the observation deck to watch the launch from there. See you later."

Steve settled back in his chair. On his console he could see a steady stream of messages scrolling upwards as various pre-launch checks were carried out and logged. He wouldn't have much to do, provided there were no hitches. He glanced around the control centre. The prevailing atmosphere was one of tension mingled with expectation. Steve almost jumped when Colonel Zero's voice suddenly boomed from the wall speaker above his head.

"Attention all personnel. This is Jupiter Station Launch Control. Launch is now T minus ninety minutes and counting. All indicators are Green. All systems are Go for launch. "

Aboard Explorer 10, Major Ireland was seated in the upper level of the ship, just aft of the pilot's cabin. He faced a row of computer screens running along the side of the compartment. From here he could monitor all of the ship's systems. At the touch of a button his chair moved along rails so that he could easily access each console. The ship was fully automated. As a pilot, Jim would be virtually redundant for most of the ten year mission. Explorer's computers would handle everything, from flight paths and acceleration to routine maintenance and water recycling. Computers would also ensure that Jim slept safely for the correct amount of time in his cryogenic unit and was awakened whenever necessary. The ship took care of everything - everything except the actual exploration of unknown worlds. Jim would take care of that side of things. The ship was there to transport him safely to each predetermined destination. Jim glanced at the cryogenic tank. Some called it a 'deep freeze'. He liked to think of it as a deep sleep. He'd experienced the effect many times in tests. The longest period of sleep he'd undergone was two weeks. He'd awoken feeling thoroughly invigorated. A useful side effect was that he'd needed only a few hours of normal sleep each night since then. He was perfectly at ease with his situation. When he came home in ten years' time he'd have ten

years back pay plus interest to collect. But he was going to earn it, by doing what he loved the most - exploring.

The minutes passed quickly as Major Ireland made routine checks and cross-checks, relaying information to Launch Control. Finally it was time to move to the flight controls in the cockpit. His chair slid forwards along its track, locking into place when it reached the flight control position. A light flashed on above his head, "Ejection System Enabled". Jim hoped he wouldn't be needing to make use of the escape system, but all the same, he was glad he had a way out - Just in case...

"Launch Control to Gantry. Clear all umbilicals. Standby to retract Gantry to launch position..."

"Attention all spacecraft: Zone Alpha is to be cleared immediately."

"T minus ten minutes. Retract Gantry to launch position."

The massive steel cage which surrounded Explorer began to move slowly back, as if to free the huge ship and allow it to soar away. Once clear of Explorer, the gantry accelerated and moved well clear.

"Major Ireland, time to take your oxygen pill and secure for launch procedure."

"Affirmative."

Soon the final seconds were being counted down:

"5... 4... 3... 2... 1... Zero - Full Power!"

Explorer's central rocket engine flared brightly.

There was no sound, no clouds of smoke, but the massive ship began to move.

Pat Dillinger sat at her desk in her make-shift studio, two decks below Jupiter Station's control centre. Laid out in front of her were half a dozen monitor screens, each showing a different perspective of Explorer. Her fingers played over buttons and switches as if she were playing a musical instrument as she adjusted focus and zoom, switching from one external camera to another to get a good overall view of the proceedings. A large central screen showed the view she was broadcasting to billions of viewers on over a dozen worlds. As her hands worked her voice was being relayed along with the images.

"Well viewers, that's the first phase of the launch successfully underway. Launch Control have confirmed that everything is fine, or as they actually said, 'All systems are go, go, go!' In just another ten minutes Major Ireland will ignite the remaining eight engines and the ship will rapidly accelerate to 50% light speed before activating her hyper-drive. We'll be watching - so stay tuned to us here at IPN - brought to you live from Jupiter Station."

Pat pressed a button on her console and the central monitor screen began displaying trailers for Martian TV dramas.

Pushing back her chair, Pat stretched out her arms and flexed her tired fingers. She turned to face a man who had been sitting quietly beside her, "Ok Doctor Morgan, your turn in two minutes."

Doctor Morgan smiled, "I didn't realise you did all this stuff yourself."

Pat smiled back, "Guess I like to be in control Doctor. OK, I'll give you a short introduction and then you can chat like we did earlier; don't worry about the camera - it's a tame one." Pat turned back to her console and switched on her remote camera. It rose up from the floor and hovered about two

yards in front of her desk. "When the green light comes on, you're being broadcast. Good luck."

The commercials came to an end and Pat switched to her remote camera.

"Welcome back to Jupiter Station. I'm Pat Dillinger and with me is Doctor Joseph Morgan, one of Earth's leading experts in Anderson Hyper Drive technology."

Pat turned to the doctor. "Doctor Morgan, would you like to briefly recap on this stage of the mission and tell us what happens next? In lay-person terms?"

"Yes, certainly Pat. I'm sure everyone at home is familiar with the Anderson Hyper Drive system. It's what makes it possible for our spaceships to travel the equivalent of hundreds of light years in mere weeks - without travelling faster than light."

"The light barrier?"

"Yes Pat, the so-called 'light barrier'. We've known for well over a hundred years that it is impossible for a spacecraft to accelerate beyond the speed of light. It was long thought that this meant we could never reach even the nearest stars in a single life-time. The Anderson Hyper Drive makes distances between the stars shorter by a process which, put simply, 'folds' empty space, relative to the spaceship and it's destination. Thus travel time is reduced by many orders of magnitude. In some areas though, space cannot be folded, the Anderson Hyper Drive has no effect - distances stay immense. This means there are several nearby stars, less than 20 light years distant that it would take years to reach.

We are now at T + 4 minutes. At T + 10 minutes the ship's remaining eight engines will be ignited to blast the ship forwards in order to hit what we term 'folded space' or 'hyper-space' at a very high velocity. She'll then continue at this high velocity for about nine hours until she is within half a light year of the star Altair, at which point space becomes inelastic. That

half a light year may seem like a mere stone's throw, but without the hyper drive that's a long, long, haul to the star's planetary system. Explorer's main engines will be fired again, taking the ship up to approximately 75% of light speed."

"Which is?"

"Er, that's about 140,000 miles per second, Pat."

"Sounds pretty fast!"

"Oh it is, very fast. But even at this speed it will take many months to reach Altair - hence the pilot will be in suspended animation."

"And he'll be out of radio contact too?"

"Yes that's right. The same natural forces that prevent the Anderson Hyper Drive from functioning in certain areas of space also make neutroni transmissions impossible. Of course, 'conventional' radio does still work normally. We've already placed neutroni relay stations near all the stars that Explorer will visit, carefully positioned to tie in with the ship's planned trajectory. When Major Ireland is near a relay station messages will be almost instantaneous. But every day he moves further from them will add about 18 hours delay to transmissions."

"So these relayed messages can be six months old before they reach us?"

"Yes, the time taken for the radio waves to travel between Explorer and the relay station at maximum range. A response to Explorer's signals will take another six months to get back. So essentially, Major Ireland will be very much on his own except for brief periods when he's back in hyper-space or near a relay station."

"Thank you Doctor Morgan. It sounds like things are happening here at Launch Control - so let's go take a look."

Back in the control centre, radio messages were being passed back and forth.

“Launch Control this is Explorer. Boost at Two percent and rising.”

“Space-time clock synchronized at mode five.”

“Explorer, we confirm. Checksum on STC is good.”

“Cabin pressure holding steady at 16.7psi. Transmedical monitoring currently on standby.”

“Confirm.”

“Flight path trajectory steady at 6-1-4 Zero Green.”

“Explorer, trajectory confirmed 6-1-4 Zero Green and steady.”

“Techno-babble generator on full.” Major Ireland was smiling broadly on Steve’s console screen.

Lieutenant Zodiac grinned, “We copy Explorer - Techno-babble generators - full power. You’re in a good mood.”

“You bet I am. This is what I really want to do - get out there and explore.

Don’t worry, you’ll get your own chances young Zodiac. You’ve got what it takes.”

Steve looked doubtful, “Uh. Can I have that in writing?”

Jim waved a hand, “Steve... We both know that by the time I get back, you’ll have your own career all sewn up and you’ll be riding high.”

“I wish Colonel Zero felt the same way. Sometimes I think...”

“A pity you don’t think more often Lieutenant,” Colonel Zero hissed. “Why hasn’t the safety officer received the scheduled update?”

Steve turned to see the Colonel standing behind him, “Sir! I er...”

Jim Ireland intervened, "Cut the lad a little slack Wil. I just unlocked the final failsafes on the hydrogen feed system. I'm awaiting confirmation from the computer before releasing that update."

Zero hesitated before replying, "If you say so Jim." He turned back to Steve, "I'll be keeping an eye on you Lieutenant Zodiac."

Major Ireland winked at Steve as Zero moved away, "There you go Steve, your first big assignment and already you've got the brass noticing you. Now route that safety update Lieutenant - pronto!"

"Routed - and thanks Jim.!"

"I'd help you further with your meteoric rise through the ranks kid, but rumour has it I've got a spaceship to fly. See you in ten Steve."

"Right - I'll have dinner waiting for you when you get back."

"I'll hold you to that young Zodiac - au revoir good buddy!"

Four minutes later everyone on Jupiter Station cheered as Explorer's main motors fired..

Colonel Zero sent Launch Control's final message to Explorer, "Launch Control to Explorer - You're looking good.. Please switch radio frequency to channel Alpha. You're Space City's baby now. Good luck Jim, we're all rooting for you."

"Roger Launch Control - and thanks. Explorer out."

That was it. Launch Control was now plain old Jupiter Station once more. From now on Space City would handle overseeing the mission.

"There he goes..." Colonel Zero shouted above the din of applause, "I sure wish I was on that ship!"

"So do I, Colonel," Steve muttered under his breath, "So do I."

All around the control centre people were slapping each other's backs and shaking hands. Steve stood alone watching the bright point of light that was Explorer as it rapidly receded into the distance, becoming just one more star in the heavens.

Lieutenant Zodiac sat patiently in a communications booth, waiting for an incoming call. He didn't have to wait long. Professor Matic's call came through right on schedule.

"Hi Steve!"

"Hi Professor, did you see the launch?"

Matt smiled, "Saw everything just fine."

"I wish you'd flown out to Jupiter Station to see the launch live."

"I just don't have the time to go planet hopping. The university here keeps me mighty busy."

"How's that robot of yours coming along Professor?"

"I reckon he'll be ready to fly spaceships in a couple of years," said Matt.

"Do you think your robots could replace people like Major Ireland?" questioned Steve.

Matt laughed, "Hey, you make me sound like one of those mad scientists from the movies, quietly replacing human beings with my fiendish mechanical substitutes."

The laugh was infectious. Steve pictured the Professor cackling evilly as he put the finishing touches to a replica of Jim Ireland. "Guess I mean, could a robot perform Jim's mission?"

"Frankly, no." said Matt. "The Major has a tough mission where he'll be living on his wits to cope with utterly unpredictable situations. Robots are too dumb for that. Still, I'd have liked to have seen a robot go along as a back-up - in case anything goes wrong."

"Is your robot ready for that kind of work Professor?"

"No, darn it. He isn't. The more sophisticated I make his programming, the more likely he is to short out with all the decision making - the neutronic processors overheat with all the calculations. But I'll have it fixed soon. Just a question of time. Say, I bet there's gonna be a great party tonight - almost makes me wish I had found the time to get out to Jupiter."

"Oh, yeah, real big party. No expense spared - they've allocated three decks for it. Live music, celebrity guests, lots of expensive food and drink. I'll probably go to bed early."

"And miss the fun?"

"I'll go along for a while, just to show willing, but I know I'll just get bored."

A few hours later the post-launch party was in full swing. With the launch over the station would soon return to normal routine. For now though, routine was on hold. The live bands were being broadcast throughout Jupiter Station.

On level 9, the recreation deck, people were crowding around the bar and talking loudly, trying to make themselves heard above the music. Half of the deck was being used as a dance floor, the lights dimmed and flashed in time with the music.

Steve sat with a glass in his hand as he watched the party.

"Hey Steve!" Astronaut Ross called as he made his way over to Steve's table.

"Great party uh?"

"Yeah. Great party."

"So how come you aren't in it?" Ross asked as he pulled up a chair.

"I'm here aren't I?" Steve shrugged.

"Only just kid, only just. Why don't you let your hair down a bit?"

"Ross..." Steve said, taking a sip from his glass, "I'm happy enough."

Ross looked at the empty glasses on the table, "How many of those things have you had?"

"Three." Steve said, putting his glass down heavily,

"You should watch it Steve, could be habit forming."

"Yeah, like chasing girls."

"You got me wrong Steve. Chasing girls isn't a habit, it's my duty - to woman-kind."

Ross pushed back his chair and stood up, gazing around the large room with mock predatory zeal. "I'm off to seek out girls that can't resist hunky spacemen. See you later kid."

Steve picked up his glass, waving a hand as Ross went back into the noisy throng.

"Aha!"

Steve turned in surprise, "Aha?" he asked, putting down his drink.

Pat took a sip of wine from her glass. "I found you!"

"You're the lady who spoke to me this morning."

"Pat Dillinger, IPN. I did manage a word or two before you made a dash for the elevator."

"Uh... Sorry Miss Dillinger, I was in a hurry."

"Glad to hear it. I wondered if my perfume had gone funny. Now, please tell me, how are the ears?"

"Pardon?"

"Oh dear..." Dillinger put her glass on the table and leaned over to inspect Steve's ears carefully. "You see a technician told me you were going to get your ears chewed off," she explained.

Steve grinned. "Yeah, guess that's about right."

"Well they seem fine to me." the girl declared, giving both ears a gentle tweak.

"Won't you take a seat?" Steve said, getting up and pulling out a chair.

"Why thank you Lieutenant Zodiac. I've been checking up on you. Purely professional, of course."

"Oh please - call me Steve."

"And do call me Pat. So, Steve, how is it you are sitting here all by yourself? Not the party type?"

Steve shook his head, "I guess not. I kinda get bored, er Pat."

"Me too. I have to go to endless functions as part of my job. Are you enjoying that orange juice?"

"You said you've been checking up?"

"Yes. I've been doing a little digging - professional interest you know."

"And what did you find?"

"Oh, all kinds of interesting stuff."

"Really?"

"I gather you badly wanted to be on that Explorer mission."

"Yes, I did. What else did you find out?"

"Oh, nothing bad. In fact I'm impressed by what I've learned about you."

"Impressed?"

"Oh yes. In fact, I was, er, wondering...."

"Yes?"

"I really would like to do a short interview with you. "

"Sure, when?"

"Well I thought maybe now would be a good time."

"With all this noise?"

"Oh yes, that's a point. Tell you what, how's about we go back to my quarters?"

"Ok, " Steve smiled, "You got yourself an interview."

"Er, what time do you have to be up tomorrow Steve?"

"Oh, anytime I like, I'm off duty for 48 hours."

"Good. I think this may take us some time.."

"I thought this was gonna be a short interview."

"Oh yes. I doubt it'll take you long. From what I've heard, I really don't think you're the talkative type. "

Ross's jaw dropped as he watched Steve and the young journalist heading for the door together. "How does he keep doing that??? He could at least have the decency to look like he's making some kind of effort..."

PART TWO

2055 AD

“And along with the rest of the World, the eyes of IPN are on Space City as the fifth ship in the Fireball XL Long-Range Space Patrol Fleet takes off on its maiden voyage” announced Pat Dillinger to her billions of TV viewers on over a dozen worlds in Earth’s ever growing World Space Empire watching this historic event being broadcast by the Inter Planetary Network. “Colonel Ananda Das is at the controls of what has been described as the most advanced version of this reliable design,” the attractive young journalist continued. “Its primary mission will be the security of the new reaches of space opening up within the distant area of our galaxy collectively known as Sector 25.”

Colonel Das watched the vista of stars appearing through the main control cabin’s panoramic windows as Fireball XL5 left Earth’s atmosphere. He turned the intercom on. “Clearing Space City Traffic Control Zone. How’s the ride, Navigator?”

In the navigation bay Lieutenant Steve Zodiac sat at the round desk staring at the astroscope.

“Everything Go-Go-Go, Colonel,” responded Steve. “I’ll have that Solar escape trajectory plotted and ready in a few minutes.”

“We’ve got time, Steve,” said Das. “Say good-bye to Earth. It’ll be a while before we get back.”

The weeks passed without event as Fireball XL5’s two-man crew got to know their brand new patrol ship.

The doors in the main control cabin opened and Colonel Das turned to see Lieutenant Zodiac enter.

"Brought the coffee, Steve?"

"Oh! Sorry Colonel. I just completed the checks of the fusion balance governors and confirmed our response interval with the beacon at Companion 2. I've also downloaded the navigational updates from Space City ... and computed possible rendezvous vectors with Fireball XL3 in the event it becomes necessary..."

"Did you polish the doorknobs?" cut in Das.

"The doorknobs, Sir?" queried Steve. "I don't..."

"Steve. Sit down," ordered Das, pointing to the co-pilots chair beside him.

"Colonel..."

"SIT"

Steve sat down.

"You're a good officer, Steve" said Colonel Ananda Das, "You're turning into a first rate Astronaut. And I appreciate the fact that, in the weeks since we've left Earth, you've rebuilt XL5 forty-two times ... adjusting things that I didn't even know we had aboard. But you've got to learn that being a WSP Astronaut means more than just keeping the ship working. Out here we're not just engineers, navigators and pilots. Out here we're diplomats, scientists, healers, mediators, policemen. Warriors if necessary. We're authority and order, Steve. We're the Earth. Hopefully its better nature. Out here we're a symbol of what our world deems holy. To what humankind aspires to become."

"Sir, I'm not sure I..."

"Then try this on for size" said Das. "The XL5 is a vital tool. But it's just a tool. Its function is to serve the larger goal..."

"And what is that, Sir?" questioned Steve.

"Bringing humanity to the stars. And that's humanity in every sense of the word. So, all you really need to do is focus on what's ultimately important ...such as my coffee."

"Yes, Sir" said Steve with a grin and ran back to Fireball's lounge to get it.

"Boy's got some rough edges but he makes fantastic coffee" mused Das to himself. "Definitely command material"

"Space City to Fireball XL5"

"XL5 to Space City," responded Das. "Go ahead."

"Prepare to receive new orders, Colonel"

A few minutes later Das called Steve over the intercom.

"Coffee's almost on its way, Colonel" responded Steve.

"Forget it. Get me an immediate course to Companion 16. Best possible speed," ordered Das.

"Trouble?"

"With a capital 'T'. Plus, we are too far away and too slow... two things that have to change right now."

Companion 16 was a fuel depot for space ships to refuel and restock, an observation platform for scientists and a stopping off place for XL patrol ships on their way to the furthest reaches of the Galaxy. It was situated ten light years from Earth on the perimeter of Earth occupied space closest to Sector 25.

The space station had a central hub from which six large spokes led to an outer ring which circled the huge metal construction.

Station Commander Lemat had just received notification from Colonel Das that Fireball XL5 was seventeen hours away. She turned to the intercom and called the Medical Section. "Doctor Venus. Please report to the Command Deck."

A few minutes later a young French Doctor, with her long blond hair tied back in a ponytail, ran onto the Command Deck. "Commander?"

"A Fireball Patrol Ship from Earth will be arriving in seventeen hours," said the Station Commander. "There's an emergency..."

"One of the crew is injured?" queried Venus.

"No. A problem has developed with the Explorer Mission. Space City reports that a severe fault has developed in the automated control system. Five months from now a scheduled course correction will not take place. In three years Explorer will go radically off course unless the problem can be corrected."

"Can't Major Ireland repair the trouble?" said Doctor Venus.

"Major Ireland went back into suspended animation eight days after sending his last report," said Lemat. "His next scheduled revival won't occur until it's too late... and the emergency revival sequencer isn't responding to commands from Earth."

"How terrible" said Venus. "What can be done?"

"Space City has found a possible answer," said Lemat. "In four days Explorer will make its closest approach to us when it executes a gravity-assisted pass of Procyon. The extreme end of the hyperbolic pass will put the ship, very briefly, at a velocity just slow enough to where another ship can

hopefully make a rendezvous and effect repairs. Fireball XL5 is the only ship in this area capable of reaching Procyon."

"Where do I come in?" questioned Venus.

"Space City is worried that the malfunction on Explorer might extend to the Life Support System as well. There's no long range telemetry coming in, and so Colonel Das on Fireball XL5 has asked for a qualified medical officer to accompany him to Procyon and make an on-site inspection. Pack your bags, Doctor...you're going for a ride."

In just under seventeen hours Fireball XL5 had arrived and was in free float alongside Companion 16 being refuelled and restocked for the mission to Procyon.

"Refuelling is nearly complete, Colonel," reported Steve to Das who was standing in one of the docking bays connected to Fireball with the Station Commander, watching the work being carried out. "Another ten minutes."

"Grand, Steve. Grand. Ah... Commander Lemat. This is my co-pilot and navigator: Lieutenant Zodiac."

"A pleasure, Lieutenant," said Lemat. "I only wish we could meet under less hectic circumstances. Oh... and this is Doctor Venus, who will be accompanying you on the mission."

Steve turned to see Doctor Venus who had also now joined them in the docking bay.

"I think you said ten minutes, Steve," said Das noticing the obvious attraction between the two. "And we can have a get-together on the way to Procyon. Help Doctor Venus get squared away on board now."

"Yes, Sir"

Das watched them enter XL5 together. "The Lieutenant is an enthusiastic crewman...always willing to take on additional responsibilities"

"So I see..."

Fireball XL5 was soon blasting away from Companion 16.

Colonel Das sat in the main control cabin with Doctor Venus beside him in the co-pilots chair.

Das opened the intercom. "All right, Steve. I'm ready to apply full boost. Everything secured back there? The ride could get bumpy"

"Everything's bolted down, Colonel" responded Steve from the navigation bay. "Course heading to Procyon is 3-7 Zero Blue."

Ananda Das now engaged Full Boost and Fireball XL5's nutomic powered Anderson hyperdrive cut in thrusting her into hyperspace. The journey to Procyon, a star 11.4 light years from Earth, would now only take days.

Two days later Steve looked in on Doctor Venus who sat reading a technical manual in XL5's Space Laboratory. "Doctor? Have you been settling in okay?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," said Venus. "I've been reviewing the transmedical systems on board Explorer. Trying to get a handle on possible problems."

"I'm sorry I haven't been more help during the trip out here," said Steve. "But running the nutomic engines the way we've been doing calls for constant supervision. I wanted to let you know that I'm qualified in fault detection and analysis. I was part of the Explorer launch crew."

"That's quite all right. I appreciate that, Lieutenant...but I've been able to muddle through in your absence," said Venus. "For instance, Major Ireland's life support system is critically linked to the flight controls. By carefully backtracking through the design and comparing with it the fault reports Space City has been receiving, I can determine if he is in any immediate danger."

"I was only offering to help, Doctor," said Steve. "I assisted in the installation of the transmedical modules..."

"...And I was part of the design team for the modules," cut in Venus. "or was it your impression that I am barely old enough to be taking temperatures...much less contribute to the mission?"

"Oh, No!" said Steve, sheepishly.

"Apologies, Lieutenant. Commander Lemat warned me that you 'Golden Boys' on the Fireballs were accustomed to results."

"I never said you were unqualified" said Steve.

"I hope not...because I believe I've found a problem, and..."

Suddenly Colonel Das's voice broke in over the intercom: "Kids, I need both of you in the navigation bay."

Steve and Venus left the space laboratory and headed down XL5's main corridor for the navigation bay side by side.

"There is one thing, Doctor. This is the first chance I've had to ask you something I've been wanting to know. Is 'Venus' your first or last name"

"Yes!" was the frustrating reply.

They entered the navigation bay together to find Colonel Ananda Das sitting at the circular desk staring at the astroscope.

"I've finally located Explorer," said Das. "We'll be reaching her almost one-eighth AU from Procyon-A ... twelve minutes after it's reached perihelion."

"Which doesn't leave us much time," said Steve.

"Getting here almost tore us apart," said Das. "Even so, we'll only get one clear chance at Explorer... before it begins regaining speed through the gravity assist off of Procyon. And not much of a chance at that."

"All I need is enough time to get on board."

"Sorry, Steve," said Das. "We'll only be within effective range of Explorer for 9 minutes. That's the best we can do. We can't manoeuvre XL5 into a better parallel course without losing the speed edge we already possess. When we're at our closest point we'll electronically 'slave' Explorer to our guidance computer and make the necessary course correction by remote control."

"Colonel" said Venus. "That won't work, Colonel Das."

"Doctor?" queried Das turning to face her.

"It's what I was going to explain to Lieutenant Zodiac. I've located a problem. I've been in communication with Earth Automation expert Matthew Matic. It is his opinion that critical interface points between the automatic flight control unit and the suspended animation systems are severely stressed."

"...which in turn could be causing the telemetry failure," added Das. "So if we attempt remotely controlling the ship..."

"... it could cause a full system shutdown, and put Major Ireland's life in serious danger," said Venus.

"So we've got no choice but to try a more hands-on approach," said Das as the technicalities of this mission sank in. "But we'll only have nine minutes."

"Maybe not," said Steve, rubbing his chin. "I might be crazy, but I think I can buy us some extra time. C'mon."

Steve led Das and Venus along XL5's main central corridor and into Fireball Junior's jetmobile bay where he opened the maintenance hatch giving access to the port side interceptor missile launcher.

"Well, Steve," said Das realising what Steve was suggesting. "You're right. You're crazy. But it might buy us that extra time."

"I know it will," said Steve. "Take out the warhead of an interceptor missile and that leaves room for me to squeeze in. You fire me ahead of XL5 with safeties off and engines on full. I should reach Explorer as much as three minutes ahead of you."

"It's suicide, Lieutenant!" said Doctor Venus bluntly. "You're throwing your life away on a gamble."

"It's what I get paid to do. Do me a favour and get me a pair of gravity boots and the grappling gun...and a thruster pack."

"I'll work up a firing solution," said Colonel Das. "And I'm presuming you've figured out how to safely get on board Explorer."

"Of course," responded Steve. "...I hope."

"And the Doctor's right," said Das. "The mission is suicide. But as you correctly pointed out, it is well within your job description. Good luck."

Venus returned to the jetmobile bay a few minutes later carrying what Steve had requested. "I brought a radiation suit for you as well as your other requests."

"I didn't ask for one," said Steve as he worked at removing the warhead from the exposed interceptor missile casing.

"True, but oxygen pills alone won't safeguard you against the sort of extremes you'll be facing out there. The suit will give you additional protection."

"Thank you, Doctor."

“And please. Call me Venus.”

Lieutenant Zodiac completed his dangerous task and turned to the young French Doctor and smiled at her. “All right, Venus...and I’m Steve.”

She smiled back at him. “All right... Steve.”

Explorer 10 was now visible with the naked eye from Fireball XL5’s main control cabin.

Steve quickly put on the radiation suit, strapped on the thruster pack and then took his oxygen pill before squeezing into the empty interceptor missile casing holding the grappling gun. Thank goodness he wasn’t claustrophobic.

Given the all clear by Steve Colonel Ananda Das fired the manned interceptor missile at Explorer hoping his targeting calculations were accurate – as Steve’s and Jim Ireland’s lives depended on them.

“Colonel Das... Why is he doing this?” asked Venus as she watched the interceptor missile streak away from Fireball towards Explorer from the co-pilots seat in the main control cabin.

“I could give you dozens of reasons, Doctor,” responded Das sitting in the pilot’s seat beside her. “It could be because he knows he’s more capable of fitting into an interceptor missile than I am. Perhaps because he’s younger and more bull-headed. It could be because I’m the commanding officer of this ship, which makes Steve expendable if it becomes necessary. He knows it and I know it. It could be because he’s Jim Ireland’s friend. It could be because he’s World Space Patrol. Pick your reason Doctor.”

“Tell me something, Colonel. Are all Space Patrol astronauts crazy?”

“I here you are studying for a degree in psychology, Doctor. You tell me” said Das. “Some of us just have to go further. Faster. Steve’s ambition has

always been to stay ahead of the others. This might be just the head start he's been looking for. I've just turned him loose, Doctor. It'll be interesting to see how far he goes."

The interceptor missile was soon running parallel with Explorer as intended – and well within grappling gun range.

Steve opened the maintenance hatch, forced his upper body out of the interceptor missile casing and fired the grappling gun at Explorer which was now less than 50 yards away.

The electromagnetic grappling clamp struck Explorer and stuck firmly to its hull.

Gripping the grappling gun with both hands Steve retracted the grappling line without unlocking the electromagnetic clamp. The gun pulled him away from the interceptor and across open space towards Explorer. He was soon standing on Explorer's hull. Steve now carefully crossed the hull heading towards the main airlock, knowing that one misstep would be his last, and entered the ship.

Once in the main computer control cabin Steve slipped off the helmet of his radiation suit so that he could see more clearly. He found the master control panel and quickly accessed the corrupted primary guidance program. He manually changed the default to the secondary guidance program and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Explorer's guidance systems had been successfully reset.

Steve now turned to the cryogenic sleep chamber in the rear of the cabin. He could see that it held his friend Major Jim Ireland in suspended animation and gave him a salute before pulling the helmet of his radiation suit back on. Steve now made his way back to Explorer's airlock and launched himself

out into space. He would soon be back on board Fireball XL5 – mission accomplished.



2057 AD

“Today marked a gala occasion at Space City as Lieutenant Colonel Steve Zodiac became the World Space Patrol’s new Senior Astronaut,” announced Pat Dillinger to her billions of TV viewers across the World Space Empire watching yet another historic event being broadcast by the Inter Planetary Network. “Gaining a promotion to full Colonel and replacing General Ananda Das who’ll be assuming Colonial Administration duties. Colonel Zodiac is shown here receiving not only his commission but also formal command of Fireball XL5 from Space City Controller Commander Zero. His crew, who Colonel Zodiac has personally selected, can be seen standing to the left of him. They are Professor Matthew Matic and Space Doctor Venus. IPN offers its own sincere congratulations to Colonel Zodiac, having witnessed this young man’s remarkable career so far, and we can only guess as to what sort of adventures await him in the years to come.”

The Beginning