



THE FASTEST GUY ALIVE

Robin and Pauline Day



Based on the Fireball XL5 TV series created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson

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THE FASTEST GUY ALIVE

Written and Illustrated

by

Robin and Pauline Day

Adapted from a comic script written by
Robin & Pauline Day with Michael Wolff



FOREWORD

Back around the turn of the century, Pauline and I were asked to write some Fireball XL5 stories for a proposed new comic. We acted not only as writers, but as consultants. The comics would-be publisher and editor knew very little about the show - but they'd obtained a licence and all systems were Go Go Go!

Well, it was a busy time, writing stories, building CGI models and creating artwork, advising, researching and writing more stories. Some years later, the Fireball XL5 comics have still not been published.

Pauline and I were writing Fireball XL5 stories and creating Fireball XL5 models and artwork long before there was any talk of a new comic. So, back to basics. No publisher, no editor - just Pauline and I bringing you new stories and new images based on our favourite TV show. That's pretty good for creativity - it means we are free of 'commercial' constraints and 'editorial constraints'. We can tell our stories the way we want to - and in a way we hope you enjoy.

Here we present to you 'The Fastest Guy Alive', adapted from a comic script we wrote with Michael Wolff. 'Adapted' in this case means we've expanded on our ideas, which were, of necessity constrained by the limitations of a 20-odd page comic. This story is a 'prequel' to the events we see in the Fireball XL5 TV series. Pauline and I don't believe in 're-imagining' or 'updating' Fireball XL5. We love the show and we are simply adding to it - and taking nothing away - except perhaps the strings. So you won't see any odd changes in race or gender or find that Space City is on the Moon instead of on Earth. Whilst we have not 're-imagined' we have 'imagined'. Fireball XL5 provides us with a rich universe to explore and people we'd like to get to know better. This story takes us back in time a little, back to the early days in Steve Zodiac's career, and how it came about that his fate became interwoven with that of Doctor Venus.

The story will unfold as a serial and we'll be covering ground that was untouched in the proposed comic - so stay tuned and enjoy the voyage.

Robin & Pauline Day



PART I

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-gray 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.”

Buckham 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 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 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... 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."

"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 Astral 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. “

“Over nine hundred colonists went out there Steve, back in the days before the Anderson 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 space-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 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 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 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 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 space 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?”

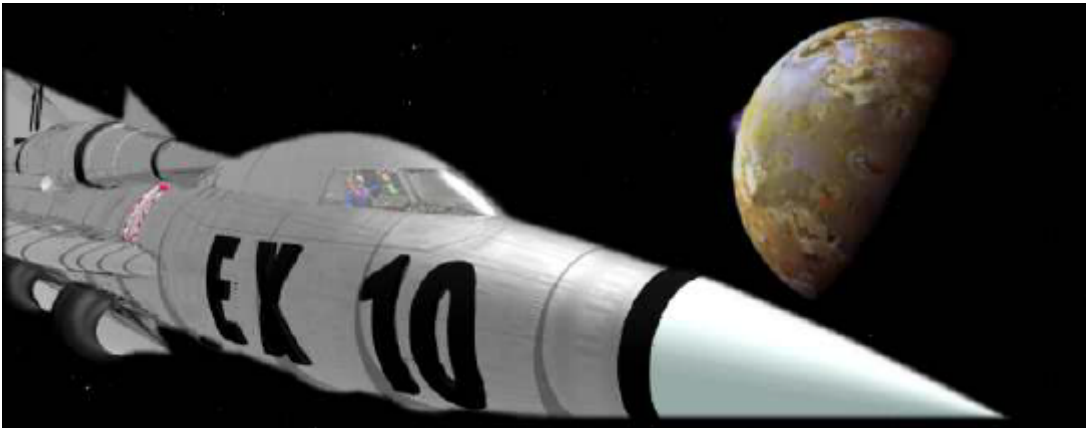
“Yes that’s right, The same natural forces that prevent the Anderson Drive from functioning also make neutroni transmissions impossible. Of course, ‘conventional’ radio does still work normally. We’ve already placed neutroni relay stations near all the stars that Explorer will visit, carefully positioned to tie in with she 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 others 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."

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

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. 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!” 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...”