

SUPERCAR^{2K}

**A Comic Book Series Proposal
Based on the Gerry Anderson
Television Production of
“Supercar”**

By Kez Wilson and Michael Wolff

Full Story Plots **Issues Zero Through Four**



Misc. MAYHEM PRODUCTIONS

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Through A Heaven's Stormy Rage

by Kez Wilson & Michael Wolff
(From an idea by Kez Wilson)

Issue I: "Mercury Falling"

Eight years ago!

Our story opens in the skies high above the American Southwest. Supercar is hurtling upwards, Mike Mercury at the controls.

"Pilot to Console," he announces. "Potentiometers are beginning to rise. Clear-Vu is indicating optimum conduit configuration."

Below him, in the Black Rock facility, Dr. Beaker, Professor Popkiss, Jimmy Gibson, Bill Gibson and Mitch are gathered around a bank of controls. Beaker's hand is hovering above a large button on a console.

"Ten seconds, Mike," Beaker announces.

"Beaker," Popkiss softly pleads, but Beaker's not listening. His attention is hotly focused on the instruments before him.

Popkiss tries again. "Beaker, we haven't worked the flux computations completely. The magnetic bulge factor is still--"

Beaker waves him off. "Engrrrr . . . nonsense. My calculations have taken the bulge into account. We face a maximum failure risk of, unghrr, three per cent. Risk to the pilot and vehicle is negligible."

High above, Mike continues racing Supercar towards a particular section of the sky. It's beginning to glow oddly, a distorted moire pattern like a heat wave rising off the desert floor.

"Potentiometers reading critical," Mike reports. "I'm going in."

At Black Rock, Beaker's hand slams down on the button. "Conduit established."

Supercar approaches the weird area of the sky. Suddenly the area begins emitting brilliant bursts of lightning. Electricity reaches for Supercar, playing wildly across the vehicle's hull.

Down at Black Rock there is massive electrical arcing taking place among the consoles. All the monitors are blazing with light.

Bill's fighting at a console, trying to operate the controls which are trying their best to electrocute him. "We're taking too much amperage," he yells. "Safety systems are offline."

"Main computer's on fire," Jimmy cries out, trying to touch the buttons on another console. "The fire prevention module's shorted out."

"Magnetic field density is increasink beyond measurable limits," Popkiss is saying as he backs away from an electrical storm crossing the console before him. "Target mass detonation waveguide destabilizing. Gödel fracturink occurring at both nodes. Beaker!"

Beaker is standing there, frozen, gazing helplessly at the chaos before him.

High above, Mike is frozen at the controls, and we close in on him as he . . . and Supercar . . . become quickly and totally consumed in light.

A final blast of electrical power . . . and then the sky is quiet and empty.

At Black Rock, Beaker and the others are staring at banks of display screens which have

suddenly become dark. Only one small computer display is operating, repeating a simple message again and again:

WORMHOLE COLLAPSED. SUPERCAR AND PILOT NO LONGER REGISTER.

* * * * *

Now!

Pictures of Mike Mercury. Sometimes with Supercar, sometimes without. A voice is speaking.

“... memories of a man who epitomized the best of the ‘old-school’ test pilot image, expertly mixing it with the cool determination and skills of a modern explorer. Holder of several piloting records, he was perhaps better known as the guiding hand of the legendary ‘Mercury-manned vehicle: Supercar’. The marvel of the age.”

Pictures of Mercury standing alongside Beaker and Popkiss, the three of them studying some computer hardcopy.

“In this exclusive footage we see the young pilot in the last days before the ill-fated ‘Leap Frog’ project. Promising to be yet another jewel in the crown of developments rising from the talented minds of the Black Rock Laboratory, ‘Leap-Frog’ instead contributed to the untimely death of a man who many believed represented the spirit of the new century . . .”

A hand stabs at a button.

A television screen goes blank.

A tired figure is sitting forlornly in a chair before a television and DVD player, one hand clutching at the controls. He is staring at the television screen, his expression carrying a long distant sadness. It is Popkiss.

He continues staring at the black screen as a figure comes out of the darkness and quietly kneels next to him. It is Berta Karsendorf and she tries to gaze into his eyes, one of her hands gently touching his in a comforting gesture.

Outside, an older Jimmy Gibson is racing down the corridor, brushing aside surprised technicians and co-workers.

He appears in the doorway to the darkened room. “Professor!”

Berta looks towards him, but Popkiss is still lost in his thoughts.

“We’re receiving telemetry from Leap Frog,” Jimmy explains. “All the channels are still closed, but data is coming in from somewhere. And remote sensors are starting to register some sort of magnetic field activity in the upper atmosphere.”

At Jimmy’s last words Popkiss looks up at him, a light once more beginning to dawn in his eyes.

* * * * *

“Almost there, dear.”

A car is driving down a solitary desert road. In the passenger seat is Felicity Farnsworth, calmly nodding over a book. Next to her is Jan Farnsworth, her face set in what most of her acquaintances would immediately recognize as her usual expression of determination. Her

hands are gripping the wheel. "How would you know?" she asks the older woman. "You haven't looked up at the road since we left the airport."

"My sense of direction has aged as well as I have," Felicity replies primly. "You know we could've arranged for a limousine, or something similar. You didn't have to drive. I'm aware of your discomfort concerning these American roads."

"I didn't ask for a limo for the same reason I didn't make an appointment," Jan says. "We're not announcing our presence here until it's too late for anyone to pull anything against us. No. I want today to be a day of surprises."

It's at this moment that the sky above them erupts with lightning. Jan panics but quickly manages to regain control of the car, steering it off the road and barely avoiding several large bolts of brilliance that cascade down near her. Next to her Felicity holds onto her hat and book as best as possible, bouncing up and down in the safety harness.

"Lightning," exclaims Felicity.

"But there's not a cloud in the sky," Jan adds, stopping the car. Completely recovered now she gets out and peers upwards, shading her eyes.

"See anything?" Felicity asks.

"An odd pattern in the sky," Jan replies, her attention on a peculiar wavy haze that's high in the air and is slowly shrinking in size. She frowns deeper. "There's also something else. I can't quite make it out."

Felicity is at the car window, squinting upwards. "You mean that little dot getting bigger?"

Jan nods. "Yes . . . it does seem to be approaching rapidly . . . Yow!"

She throws herself to the ground as a large object rips swiftly through the air above her, managing to miss colliding with the car (and Jan) by what seems to be only inches. Jan hugs the ground, grimacing as the roar of the passing object pulls at her with a deafening suddenness.

Quickly getting up she moves to the car. "Auntifel . . ."

"I'm all right, dear," the older woman murmurs, the top half of her head peeping up over the doorway. "Might I hope that you had a good look at whatever it was we almost became part of?"

"I intend to find out," Jan replies, getting back into the car and gunning the engine. She races off across the desert, traveling over a low hill and then bringing the car to a sudden halt.

"Oh my God!"

"Oh quite," adds Felicity softly.

Before them is an incredible sight. In the distance stretches an enormous industrial research complex. But the attention of the ladies is focused on a much nearer object. It has raced out of the sky and barely pulled out of a steep dive in time to prevent being smashed against the desert floor. Now it rests, its hull smoking, at the end of a deep gouge it's made in the sand.

Supercar.

As Jan and Felicity watch the hatch slides open. A single figure slowly begins to stagger out of the vehicle. It stumbles out and falls onto the desert floor. Jan begins moving towards him.

"Be careful, dear," Felicity warns.

But Jan goes closer, totally lost to all but concern. She reaches the man just as he manages to stagger back up to his feet. He notices her, takes a few faltering steps in her direction . . .

And Mike Mercury collapses upon the ground.

Jan rushes to him, anxious to help. Behind her Felicity is struggling to catch up.

"Stay where you are. Don't move!"

Both women look up. The sky above them is filled with a squadron of sleek hovering shapes. They bear a superficial resemblance to Supercar.

"Don't move!"

* * * * *

Hands fighting the controls . . .

Instruments registering wild readings . . .

Everything spinning in a brilliant haze of light . . .

. . . and Mike Mercury suddenly awakens to find himself in a bed. He sits up, looking around to see the familiar surroundings of his quarters. Relieved that things might be coming back to normal after all he adjusts himself back against the headboard, rubbing tiredly at his face. "Oh, man!"

Opening his eyes he sees an elf solemnly staring at him from the doorway. Or at least that's his first impression. On a longer look he realizes that the "elf" is actually a soft-eyed quiet girl wearing a laboratory coat and glasses. She's clutching a hand computer close to her bosom.

Mike nods politely at the girl. "Miss . . ."

The girl continues staring owlshly at Mike.

"Are you all right?"

No response. "Am I all right?" Mike wonders aloud to himself. He's now noticing the medical equipment lined unobtrusively against the opposite wall.

"Everything is fine, Mike. Or so I hope, now that you are back mit us."

Mike looks back towards the familiar voice. "Professor!"

Professor Rudolph Popkiss is slowly pushing a tray into the room. The tray carries an ornate tea service, but Mike only has eyes for his friend, noticing that the man seems older. His glasses are thicker and there's a pronounced limp.

"Professor . . . what happened?"

"Let me get comfortable first, please," the old man replies, settling down in a chair next to Mike's bed. He nods at the silent girl in the doorway and speaks German to her. The girl gives Mike a final look and leaves.

"Who the heck---?"

"Doctor Berta Karsendorf," Popkiss replies, carefully pouring a cup of tea. "In charge of advanced computer research und applications, as well as chief of computer operations here."

"Professor . . ." Mike absently accepts the tea as he stares at Popkiss. "What the hell's going on? What happened? To the test? To you?"

"To me?" replies Popkiss, "I simply got older. As did ve all. To the test?" Popkiss slowly shrugs, not wanting to look Mike directly in the eyes. "You didn't . . . achieve orbit."

"Professor . . . what happened?"

Popkiss leans back wearily in the chair. "The wormhole apparently established a conduit across time instead of space, Mike. We all thought you and Supercar were destroyed when the singularities collapsed. We are still trying to understand what happened, but we now believe you were, instead, projected into the future."

Mike is slowly spilling the tea onto the floor, his face open and uncomprehending. "The . . . future?"

Popkiss nods tiredly again. "Duration eight years, ten months, fourteen days, ten hours, thirty-two minutes and . . . four seconds to be precise."

"Professor . . ." Mike tries to make sense out of it, fails and settles back against the bed. "But how . . . I mean, what happened . . ."

"Beaker's calculations were incomplete," Popkiss replies with a small touch of harshness. "He didn't realize the possible temporal distortion of the wormhole. The energies released affected time as well as space."

"Temporal . . . look. Where's the Doc? Where's . . . my God. Eight years? Where's Jimmy? What's happened?"

Unknown to both men they are being watched on a monitor screen by Berta Karsendorf.

Popkiss is sitting back, looking very tired. "Jimmy is with Supercar," he says, "supervising its examination and repair. He wants to meet you soon and is looking forward to seeing you again. But you need to rest, Mike. You've been through an ordeal and you need to regain your strength. If I fix you another cup you must try to drink it this time---"

Mike leans forward, grabbing Popkiss' arm. "Tell me what happened."

"Beaker . . . Horatio is . . ."

"Professor?"

Popkiss is staring at Mike, his face stricken. "When you disappeared into the wormhole the thought you and Supercar had been destroyed. Beaker took the responsibility all on himself. He and Bill Gibson left with the Supercar-II prototype. We tried to track them, only to see it blow up over the Pacific."

"Blow up?"

"Dead, Mike. Supercar-II blew up, killing Beaker and Bill Gibson."

* * * * *

Early the next morning.

Mike is jogging around the fence bordering the complex, trying to get back into some sort of feeling of normalcy, but it isn't easy. Not with the looming structures nearby . . . the extensive construction yards, communication antenna arrays, generators and laboratories.

The Professor wasn't kidding, Mike thinks. All this didn't pop up overnight.

Eight years!

He is passing behind a sign on the fence, not seeing the words *MASTERWORKS TECHNOLOGIES, INC.* on it.

Jimmy working on Supercar . . . Popkiss older . . .

The Doc dead!

Doc Beaker . . . dead.

At a window on the administration building we see Popkiss. He is standing there, watching Mike jog. As he observes he is addressed by someone else in the room.

"So Mercury is intact? Healthy?"

"All indications would seem so," Popkiss quietly replies. "Remember that, from our perspective, he's been gone eight years . . . but, to him, it was only a few seconds of exposure to the wormhole. Most of his problems were from surviving the crash rather than from going through the wormhole."

A seated figure is in the shadows of the office. It is this person who has asked the question. "So, in your opinion, Friend Mercury could stand to receive a few more shocks?"

Popkiss sighs. "Since there seems to be no way to avoid them," he looks over his shoulder to stare angrily at the unseen man, "yes!"

Meanwhile, Mike has reached the end of his jogging and is standing on one of the main industrial thoroughfares of the complex, hands on hips, staring up at a large sign which reads *MASTERWORKS TECHNOLOGIES, INC (Home Of The SC-2K)*.

"Can I help you, Mister Mercury?"

Mike turns to see a guard approaching. "Yeah, ah-hhhh . . . I was just looking for Jimmy Gibson."

"You're almost there. Hangar/Laboratory Block One where they took Supercar yesterday. Just straight on ahead and past the launch transports. Can't miss it."

"Thanks."

The guard is still smiling. "Just wanted to say it's a thrill meeting you. My folks took me to Wendover when I ten. I saw you take the Redwood Cup, flying that Saab."

Mike is beginning to feel displaced again, but he struggles to keep his smile. "So how old're you now?"

"Twenty-two. Good to have you back." The guard waves and returns to his post.

Mike turns away. Four years ago . . . for me.

He continues walking and soon reaches the indicated building. The cavernous front doors are open and Mike approaches, entering them to see . . .

The original Black Rock laboratory. But it's only a picture on a sign reading "From Humble Beginnings". Mike steps past the sign and stops dead in his tracks. "Holy . . ."

Before him is the main hangar and laboratory for Masterworks Technologies. It looks even larger (and busier) than the 747 construction hangar at Boeing. The floor is filled with various Supercar-variant vehicles being constructed, modified and tested. The ceiling is festooned with a continually moving collection of cranes which are hauling components and completed vehicles. Along the sloping walls are shelf-like bays holding still more workshops. People are at their jobs everywhere, and a continual series of announcements fill the air.

"Pulse-effect engine tests will occur on schedule in block sub-30. Please review all safety codes. Microwave shield bonding facility has been cleared for construction schedule RS449. Analysis teams are asked to submit proposals to Doctor Gibson no later than 1800 hours today. Templates for all hydraulic systems coded H1 through H32 have been completed . . ."

"Mike!"

Mike turns to find himself suddenly gripped in a bear-hug. "Bill! But the Professor told

me you and the Doc . . .”

The man backs away a bit, his smile becoming tentative. “It’s Jim, Mike. Jimmy.”

Mike is struggling with about nineteen different emotions. “Oh God! Yeah . . . of course it’d be, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah.” An uncomfortable pause passes between the two men before Jimmy’s expression brightens again. “C’mon, though, and see this.” Jimmy takes Mike by the arm, leading him off to the side. “So. What do you think of the toyshop?”

“An honest opinion?”

“Sure.”

“It’s . . . it’s . . . Jimmy, if I have one more surprise dumped on me I’ll crawl back out into the desert.”

“I understand,” Jimmy replies, becoming calmer. “At least I think I do. We’re all having to adjust to a whole lot since yesterday. But here . . . c’mon and say hello to someone.”

“Someone” turns out to be Supercar . . . lying on one of the nearer test beds. It’s almost unrecognizable, what with large portions of its hull removed, and numerous pieces of equipment attached to the exposed systems within.

“Now before you get excited, I’ll have everything as good as new soon,” Jimmy explains. “In fact, it’ll be better than before, although that’s not saying much. Would you believe this original design is still considered state-of-the-art? When you disappeared and the second prototype was . . . gone . . . we practically had to build again from scratch. The Professor found out he couldn’t completely duplicate a lot of the original systems which had been modified by Doc Beaker. Fortunately Bertie came on board and managed to introduce some new design techniques which helped.”

“Bertie?”

“Oh, ah-hhhh . . . Berta. Doctor Karsendorf. You know---”

“Oh! Blabbermouth. You mean she actually talks?”

Jimmy’s smile becomes uncomfortably frozen, and Mike has a sudden sinking feeling.

“Jim . . . please tell me she’s not standing behind me right now.”

“Mike . . .”

But Mike is slowly turning around to meet a somewhat severe expression on the face of Berta Karsendorf. The girl gazes at him for a moment before handing several computer discs to Jim and walking away.

“I feel like I’m in Rebecca,” Mike mutters, turning back to Jimmy.

“Don’t let Bertie rattle you,” Jimmy says, smiling. “She’s not too sociable, but she knows computers inside and out.”

“Pretty, too.”

“Yeah, she’s OK.” Jimmy leads Mike to an office adjoining the test bed. With the door closed the sounds from outside are diminished and Jimmy waves Mike to a chair as he moves to a control console. Touching a button causes several screens to light up, showing a variety of scenes.

“Since you left we expanded,” Jimmy explains. “Masterworks has contracts with thirty countries. We’re building Supercar variants for industrial, government and military use. A lot of the subsystems are also contracted out to people like Daimler-Benz, Rolls-Royce, Toshiba,

Novaya Matsukov, IBM---

"What's wrong, Jimmy?"

Jimmy makes a show of watching the screens. "What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe it's because of what's happened to me that I've got a weird perspective on all this. Or maybe this feeling I have is because there really is something here that a lot of people aren't telling me. I mean I disappear . . . the Doc and Bill are blown up . . . this place becomes a multinational crawling with little German elves. The chain just doesn't connect for me. Something's missing here, and I keep waiting to wake up from a dream I'm having."

Jimmy slowly turns away from the screens.

"And Masterworks, Jimmy? Masterworks? Maybe I'm a little slow on the uptake, but that's striking me as being just a tad sick."

"Mike---

Jimmy's smile is once again becoming uncomfortably frozen, and Mike raises an eyebrow. "Is the elf back?"

"Mike . . ."

Mike turns around again but, instead of Berta Karsendorf, he's facing a large, well-muscled man accompanied by two of Masterworks security people. The man is favoring Mike with a rather predatory expression, and Mike is having the oddest feeling that he's seen the man before, which is impossible because . . .

"Dodson! But you're . . ."

"Dead," replies Dodson with an evil smile. "You forget where you've been, Mercury. You also forget that Hobe Dodson had a son."

Mike is looking at the man warily. "So you're---

"Josh Dodson," Jimmy quickly replies. "Chief test pilot and part of the security staff here."

"Oh, Mister Mercury and I are old friends," Dodson says. He hasn't taken his eyes off of Mercury. "I'm sure he remembers me. Even with a time warp it couldn't have been that many years since Wendover. An impressive bit of flying that day."

Mike is suddenly feeling tired with the weight of memory. "Josh---

"Did I ever tell you about it, lads?" Josh asks the men with him. "Mister Mercury in the Saab 105, and my Dad flying the Alpha."

"I wasn't responsible for your father's crash," Mike tells Josh.

"Oh no. I never said you were." Josh hasn't lost his smile, but his eyes are dangerous. "You were simply the man that my father was trying to beat when he went down."

"He took that turn too tight and lost control."

"Right," replies Josh with a nod. "You took home the Redwood Cup . . . and my Mom took Dad home in a little metal can."

Silence. Mike and Josh studying each other quietly for several moments.

"What exactly is it you want, Josh?" Mike finally asks.

"Only a chance to tell my Mom that I managed to fly with the great Mike Mercury."

"Dodson . . ." Jimmy says warningly.

Dodson ignores him. "Only a chance to achieve closure, as it were."

Mike raises an eyebrow. "Here? Now?"

"No time like the present . . . so to speak. I've been thinking you'd like a closer look at the SC-2K . . . and I've got two Condors warmed up outside."

Mike is really on his guard now, but is managing to feel more in control. "What's this going to prove, Josh?"

"To you . . . probably nothing. To me . . . maybe everything."

Jimmy steps forward. "I haven't authorized any flights, Dodson."

"Here," Dodson replies airily, handing a paper to Jimmy. "Authorization for shakedown flight of two Condors off the production line. I would've asked Foster, but he left to take that other job. And Mercury's a good pilot." Dodson's eyes rake Mercury up and down. "A very good pilot."

Jimmy is looking from the authorization to Mike. "Mike . . ."

"It's OK, Jim," Mike replies, his eyes still on Dodson. "I wouldn't mind a closer look at one of these Supercar variants."

"Good-o," Dodson replies, smiling and turning. "Outside on the test pad in five."

Mike and Jimmy watch him leave. "Dodson's father died before I joined up with Doc and the Professor to develop Supercar," Mike softly explains.

"You don't have to do this, Mike," Jimmy insists. "Dodson just wants---"

"I know what Dodson wants," Mike replies, a little sharply. "And, if he's anything like his father, then I know that the best way to handle him is to prove the point as quickly as possible. Either that, or I'll be spending a lot of time looking over my shoulder. Besides," he adds, his mood lightening, "I really do want a closer look at one of these variants."

Jimmy doesn't look too reassured, but quietly leads Mike outside. They approach what seems to be a parking lot surrounded by aircraft support gear. The lot carries six or seven heli-pad-type circles.

Two of the circles are occupied by "Condor" variant SC-2K's (the civil aviation four-seat model). Dodson is standing by one of them, and he nods happily towards the other vehicle. "Anytime you're ready, Mike. I can call you Mike . . . can't I?"

Jimmy is glaring at Dodson. "No flight suits? No helmets? No standard prep, Dodson?"

"Mr. Gibson," Dodson says placatingly. "Relax sir! Relax! It's only a simple hop around the test field. Ten . . . fifteen minutes top. Just enough to let Mike stretch his legs a bit. We'll be in constant interlock with primary ground control."

While Dodson talks, Mike is carefully circling his Condor, examining it. He says nothing and is peering into the open cockpit when Jimmy comes close.

"I'm liking this less and less," Jimmy tells Mike.

"I'm pretty calm," Mike replies.

"I can see that."

Mike is carefully moving into the cockpit. "Sometimes, Jim, the best way to survive a trap is to step right into it."

"This is stupid," Jimmy declares. "There's no reason for you to do this."

"Look at him," Mike murmurs calmly, sending a brief nod in Dodson's direction. "He's practically salivating seeing me climb into this."

"I can get the Professor---"

"He's obsessed," Mike continues, lowering himself into the seat and checking the con-

trols. "Up until yesterday I was an unpleasant memory. Now I'm here . . . within reach . . . and anything he's thrown together had to be thrown together in a hurry. Hasty. I'd rather face the chance of him having made a mistake now then later on . . . after he's had an opportunity to plan."

Dodson is at the controls of his Condor. "Ready, Mike?"

Mike touches his own communicator. "Ready. Is there a flight plan stored here?"

"Nah-hhhhh . . . just follow my lead. Take 'er up to two-twenty feet, then out to the south where the test field is." He adjusts some controls and his Condor roars to life.

Jimmy turns back to Mike. "Mike . . ."

"Better move back, Jim," Mike warns softly. "I might be a little rough on take-off." He touches his own controls. "Charging engines."

In a blast of jetwash, Dodson's Condor rises into the air.

Jimmy moves away from Mike's Condor, then suddenly turns and begins racing back towards the hangar, already raising his cell phone.

"Pilot to . . . Console," Mike says. "Condor, ah-hhhhh . . ."

"Condor Three-Seven-Seven, this is Primary Ground Control," replies a voice from the speaker. "Interlock telemetry feeding back five-by-five. You are cleared to follow Dodson Test Flight Course Oh One Oh One."

"Right," mutters Mike as he reaches for the main controls. Bracing himself he tries for a smooth vertical take-off, and almost makes it as his Condor wobbles into the air.

In the central control room for Block One, Jimmy comes through the door, startling the technicians gathered at the consoles. "I want Dodson's Condor test on interlock as tight as possible," he declares. "Get ready to bring the other Condor under direct control if need be."

One of the technicians looks surprised. "But Mister Dodson . . ."

Jimmy goes to him, fire in his eyes. "What about Dodson?"

"He said this was going to test flight interlock on minimal settings. A simulation of emergency conditions."

"Cancel the test," Jimmy orders, reaching for a microphone. "Mike . . . Mike . . ."

"You can't contact them now," the technician says.

"What?"

"It was part of Dodson's test parameters. All communication is one-way, from the Condors only. Our communication link was shut down the moment the other Condor took off."

Jimmy stares at the technician before his eyes rise slightly to meet an unreadable expression on the face of the nearby Berta Karsendorf.

* * * * *

Mike brings his Condor to the required altitude, still making adjustments. He's having a bit of difficulty becoming acclimated to the new controls, plus his Condor seems a bit sluggish. "Or maybe it's me," he mutters to himself. "Shot through a time wormhole only yesterday, and I'm flying in a test set-up by some yoho who probably wants to see me dead."

Dodson's Condor suddenly roars close-by. Mike struggles to maintain control as the other vehicle soars off.

"You're gonna have to do better than that, old son," Dodson's voice challenges smoothly.

Mike is watching the other Condor through slitted eyes. "Right," he murmurs softly, his hand resting on the throttle.

Dodson smiles as he sees the other Condor picking up speed and beginning to match his course. "That's right, my lad," he purrs. "Come right along."

He suddenly swings hard to the right. The other Condor follows, a bit less actively.

"Not as responsive as Supercar," Mike comments half to himself, "but some meat on the bones at least." He touches the communicator. "Dodson! Is this your idea of a simple test?"

"Yes," Dodson replies. "My idea. Of course, to two skilled pilots such as ourselves . . ."

Dodson makes a sudden braking maneuver, then cuts close beneath Mike's Condor, almost clipping him.

". . . it should be just a stroll on Sunday," he finishes.

Mike is fighting with sluggish controls. "I can't make up my mind if you're suicidal or just plain crazy, Josh."

"Oh not suicidal," Dodson declares. "That'd be rude. After all . . . you're a guest. You should go first!"

Dodson quickly rolls about and races his Condor swiftly across Mike's course, forcing Mike to take radical evasive action. Mike is still fighting the controls, and now he sees several indicators begin to blink red.

"Okay Mercury," he tells himself, "this ranks as a stupid move. Now what?"

* * * * *

In the central control room, Jimmy has appropriated the main console and is barking orders while trying a variety of moves. "I want a link re-established with Mike's Condor. Try a maser burst from the communications test platform if you can get it aimed. Also see if interlock can be increased to standard levels. I want pursuit and rescue ships in the air. Get Mike's attention, or at least keep Dodson away from him."

"We're still getting telemetry from the Condors," a technician reports from his post. "Mercury's vehicle is reading insufficient fuel flow to the engines, as well as minimum-level amperage to flight controls."

In the back of the room, ignored by everyone else, Berta Karsendorf has been quietly entering instructions into her hand computer. She gives the back of Jimmy's head a brief look, then returns to her work.

* * * * *

Back in the air, Mike has taken his Condor closer to the ground.

Dodson is swiftly gaining from behind.

"Not keeping to the test profile, old son," Dodson announces lightly.

"Tough," Mike replies, trying to maintain control. "Maybe I can slide this thing into a landing . . . what?" His attention is suddenly drawn to the central display which is announcing: DAM-

AGE CONTROL SYSTEMS REBOOTED. SAFETY SYSTEMS ONLINE. MALFUNCTIONING ENGINES JETTISONED. EMERGENCY SOLID FUEL MOTORS ACTIVATED.

"What the . . ."

Mike holds on as the engines are suddenly blown away from his Condor. This is followed by the firing of twin solid fuel rocket motors which send him racing on ahead.

Mike is nodding. "Okay . . . now I've got some speed to work with here."

EMERGENCY MOTOR CUTOFF IN . . . SEVENTY-FIVE SECONDS. ADVISE EMERGENCY LANDING OR SWITCHING TO AUTOLAND.

"More than enough time," Mike mutters.

"What're you up to, Mike?" Dodson asks.

"Getting my second wind," Mike replies, and suddenly guns his Condor straight up. Going into a tight loop he straightens out and is now flying rapidly towards Dodson on a collision course. Shocked, Dodson immediately pulls out of the way, his Condor tumbling wildly.

Mike continues flying back towards Masterworks, his eyes watching the steadily decreasing countdown on the rocket motors. He glances up, though, to see Dodson's Condor swiftly gaining.

"I suppose you thought that was pretty clever," Dodson remarks angrily.

Mike shakes his head. "No, Josh . . . I think this is pretty clever."

His display reports EMERGENCY MOTOR CUTOFF. EMERGENCY MOTOR JETTISON.

Drag chutes suddenly pop out from behind Mike's Condor, pulling the spent motor casings out of their housings . . . and into where they suddenly collide with Dodson's vehicle. The chutes drape tightly over Dodson's cockpit, obscuring his view. His Condor begins wobbling away through the sky.

AUTOLAND ENGAGED, Mike's display says. Louvers open on either side of the cockpit, and para-glider wings rapidly inflate. Keeping his eyes on the controls, Mike works to glide his machine down to a smooth landing on the Masterworks strip, the para-glider wings serving as an emergency cushion which gradually deflates.

Mike carefully climbs out of the cockpit as several emergency vehicles roar up. Jimmy's riding in the lead one and he's the first to jump out and reach Mike. "You okay?"

"That was interesting," Mike concedes. He looks out towards the south. "Dodson?"

"He's . . . down," Jimmy says, and it's obvious he's trying not to smile.

Mike raises an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Out in the desert . . . several miles from the Masterworks complex . . . Dodson is pulling himself out of his Condor (which has also landed on emergency para-glider wings).

"All right," he's snarling half to himself. "Friend Mercury. We'll see."

* * * * *

Back at the test stand office, Jimmy's shaking his head. "I'll have to do something about Dodson," he says. "If this gets ugly---"

"It's already gotten ugly," Mike replies. "What's a little more---"

"Jimmy," announces Popkiss' voice from a speaker. "Is Mike with you?"

"Yes, Professor."

"We have a surprise visit from the front office. You und Mike had better come to mein office."

Mike watches an uncomfortable look cross Jimmy's face but remains silent. Jimmy signs off and rapidly types several instructions into a computer console. He then turns to Mike and produces a smile. "C'mon. You'll love the Professor's office."

"A visit from 'the front office'?" Mike asks, an eyebrow raised.

Jimmy appears more nervous than before, touching his fingertips to his temples. "Yeah. C'mon."

They leave the office, passing Supercar which is being worked upon by a spiderlike framework of robot arms.

* * * * *

"So tell me, Jim," Mike says casually. "Is it 'Doctor Gibson' now?"

The two men are walking along a long wide carpeted corridor.

"Ah-hhhh, yeah. Actually, I got my degree in aeronautical engineering from the Navy."

"Navy?"

"Yeah. Took my aviator training there and received a lieutenant jg's commission. Technically I'm the Navy and Defense Department's liaison with Masterworks. But I wanted to specialize in power generation and life-support systems as they applied to air and spacecraft."

"Like Supercar."

"Yeah."

The men are approaching a door marked Popkiss: Chief Of Research.

"What's going to happen, Jim?"

"Mike . . . God. I'd better let the Professor tell you."

Mike raises an eyebrow but says no more as Jimmy opens the door and lets him enter. Doing so, Mike stops and lets out a slow whistle. In his memory Popkiss' lab was a cluttered hole in the wall with barely enough room to hold all his books and computer gear. Now he stands in what seems to be a huge library on one side, and a fully-equipped, computer-operated research work station on the other.

"Not bad, Professor."

At the computer console Popkiss turns and favors Mike with a gentle smile. "It turns out being able to stretch mein arms does help on occasion." His eyes move to Jimmy. "Have you told him yet?"

Mike looks from one to the other. "Told me what?"

"I . . . wanted to," Jimmy said, running a hand through his hair. "I thought I'd be able to. But I look at him and . . . the words get stuck."

Popkiss copies Jim's motion, touching his own hair. "Yah," he murmurs softly.

"Tell me what?" Mike insists. "C'mon, people. What's one more surprise on top of everything else?"

"Vat indeed?" Popkiss says half to himself.

It's at this point that the doors to the office open. Two large men in business suits enter and stand to either side. Moments later a third man enters, this one drifting in on a hover chair. A wizened and thoroughly unpleasant looking figure, the flesh flabby and spotted on his frame, his head looking like some piece of old, smooth fruit. But the eyes which rise to regard Mike

are cold, bright and carry a sense of very nasty humor, as if some sort of bad joke is reaching the punchline.

Mike doesn't like the feeling that he's seen this man before.

The man gives Mike a wicked grin, sitting back in the chair. "Have I actually changed that much in eight years, Mercury? Perhaps you need more rest."

Everything falls into Mike's head like an iron weight. "Masterspy!" he cries out, taking an instinctive lunge towards his old enemy. But the business suited men move quicker and place themselves firmly between Mike and the old man, grabbing Mike and restraining him.

End Issue One

Issue #2: "Mercury Rising"

This proves to be a mistake as Mike goes into action, slamming the men together and shaking himself loose from their grip. They move on him and find out that passing through a time warp . . . as well as crashing on the desert . . . hasn't slowed Mike down any. He uses a well-placed kick to disable one of the henchmen, then concentrates on exchanging judo moves with the other.

But the first henchman sees an opportunity and lunges out with an arm, snagging Mike's ankle and tripping him against one of the bookshelves. Mike falls and the henchmen both draw guns, leveling them at Mike. A tense moment . . .

"Do not hurt him," a new voice replies. "At least . . . not yet."

Mike sees that a fourth person has entered the room, assuming a position of respected privilege behind Masterspy's chair. Again the years have made changes, but Mike's memory is working better at adjusting.

"Zarin!"

"Mister Zarin," the man replies from behind a cold and triumphant smile. "Chief of Security for Masterworks Technologies."

Mike moves to his feet, his eyes returning to Masterspy, dread slowly crawling onto his face. "You're handling all this much better than I would've given you credit for," Masterspy replies. "But then, we're both familiar with your talent for exceeding expectations."

Mike backs away further, glancing at Popkiss and Jimmy who've been watching from one side. "Don't tell me Masterworks . . . this place . . . is owned by Masterspy."

"That person no longer exists," the old man in the chair replies. "But, then again, he never truly existed at all. As you can see, the time has finally arrived for Spiro Masters: CEO of Masterworks Technologies, Inc. Successful businessman . . . entrepreneur . . ." his smile widens evilly, "pillar of the community."

"Wanted for terrorism, industrial espionage, sabotage." Mike's eyes flick at Zarin. "Murder."

Zarin's eyes cringe slightly and he leans close to Masters. "He refers to that damned monkey of theirs. Tell them, Master Spiro. Explain it to them."

Mike continues to stare at Zarin, and his expression isn't pleasant. "Yeah . . . 'Master

Spiro' . . . explain how your big brave Chief of Security manages to kill a small monkey all on his own. Was it tough, Zarin? Did you have a hard time when you snuffed Mitch out?" His eyes move to Masters. "Was it a big strategic triumph for you, Masters? Using a small boy and a monkey as bait?"

Zarin slowly moves a bit further behind Masters' chair.

Behind Mike, Popkiss and Jimmy exchange a small, guilty look.

Masters silences everyone with a slightly upraised hand. "All interesting charges," he continues to Mike. "Presuming, of course, one could make them stick. Peculiar, though, how all my accusers have had a tendency to vanish. Some into the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Some . . . only recently re-appearing." Masters glides closer to Mercury. "By God, Mercury, I'm finding myself enjoying your return more than I thought I would. You've recovered, but not so much that you're not entertaining."

Mike is still struggling to sort it all out. "You own all this. So this means you own . . ."

Masters nods pleasantly. "Go ahead and say it, Mercury. I'd love to hear your voice actually say the words. I'd love to hear you say 'Spiro Masters owns Supercar'." Masters voice lowers to a ghoulish whisper. "Go ahead, Mercury. Try it. 'Masterspy . . . owns . . . Supercar.'"

Mike is staring at the old man, not able to make his mouth work.

"Ah. Perhaps with some practice, then." Masters glides back. "Actually, to be correct on the matter, I didn't quite own Supercar. Not until you were so kind to bring it back to me yesterday, for which I am, by the way, rather grateful. I did, however, own the technology, and so I was able to devote my time to build newer models although," he squints at Jimmy and Popkiss, "there was initially some resistance on the part of some." Moving over to Popkiss' desk he helps himself to a cigar from a humidor. Zarin is immediately at his side, helping him prepare and light it.

"You've always had excellent taste, Professor," Masters remarks, once the cigar is going to his satisfaction. "Of course, the market I've established in Cuba has helped." He turns back to Mike. "And now to the rest of the story, Mercury. You see, after the failure of the Leap Frog project, and Beaker's own little . . . contribution . . . to the situation, there was no longer a Supercar for me to be obsessed over. I was a free man. Of course Popkiss and Gibson attempted to make a go of it, but they lacked funding to build another Supercar.

"I, on the other hand, possessed funding---"

"Honestly gathered, of course," Mike remarks.

Masters smiles. "Of course. With my own hands. And with this funding I took the opportunity to buy out what was left of the Supercar project. You see the results today. Masterworks. The Supercar SC-2K. I've actually taken Beaker and Popkiss' work and enlarged it. Magnified it . . . glorified it . . ."

"Perverted it," Mike mutters.

Masters glares at Mike. "Hate can be buried, Mercury. Many things can be buried, given time."

"You would know."

The wicked smile returns. "So I would. But let's leave wishful thinking and pleasant fantasies aside for the time being and deal with business. You. Me."

"You go to Hell."

Masters concedes the point. "Eventually. But first we will work together. Your appearance yesterday proves that Leap Frog, although unstable, is apparently workable as a time machine."

"A time---"

"Beaker's Leap Frog satellite is still in orbit above us," Masters explains. "The entire world witnessed the phenomenon of your return. Governments are already plotting some sort of move to try and gain control. We must move fast and, since contact with the satellite has not yet been achieved, a more direct approach must be tried."

Mike feels a dawning thought within him. "You want me to fly up there in Supercar."

"Admittedly the original Supercar does possess the potential for spaceflight," Masters concedes. "The Leap Frog system was designed to replace booster rockets, but we have solid fuel boosters which can do the job just as well."

"What about your precious SC-2K model?"

"Despite the best efforts of my scientists," Masters glances at Popkiss and Jimmy, "the variants do not enjoy full space capability. The original prototype does and it is, currently, the best chance for an early space mission. I know that work is already underway at Vandenberg, Cape Canaveral, Baikonur, Malta, Korou, Jiuquan and Tanegashima, but Supercar could get to Leap Frog first. You know it and I know it."

Mike slowly approaches Masters. "And give you the secret of time travel."

"Would you rather a national government gain control? Do you see what could happen? The potential for global war over an operational time travel process?"

"I see you . . . with a time machine . . . and I'm glad I skipped breakfast."

Masters watches Mike for a long moment. Then he sits back and maneuvers his chair towards the door. "Convince him," he orders Popkiss and Jimmy. "Make certain he understands."

"Understand this," Mike fires back. "I'm not working for you."

Masters had been gliding down the corridor. Now he stops and turns slightly. "By the way, Mercury . . . thank you once again for returning my property."

Mike stands there, clenching his hands, trying to drown out the mocking laughter.

He feels a touch on his shoulder and whirls around to face Popkiss.

"Mike---

"Working for Masterspy?" Mike asks hotly. "Working for him? After all that's happened? Especially with Mitch? What's the deal, here? More secrets, Jimmy?"

Jimmy steps close. "Mike, listen---

"I don't get either of you. I seriously don't."

"We need to talk," Jimmy insists.

"Yah," agrees Popkiss softly. "But not here. Somewhere else. Somewhere quiet. Come."

* * * * *

"I like your notion of 'quiet'," Mike says later. He, Jimmy and Popkiss are standing atop an isolated mesa. Nearby is the SC-2K which brought them but, as Mike watches, Jimmy uses

a remote control mechanism to send it flying off.

"We worry about Masters und his people listening," Popkiss explains. "Zarin has all of Masterworks monitored."

"Which brings us to the particular reason why you and Jimmy are staying with him." Mike faces Popkiss, hands on hips. "Helping him build Masterworks? Developing new Supercars?"

"Not as good as the original---"

Mike waves it off. "You forgot how many times he's had it in for us? And you guys just roll over and build this . . . this empire for him?"

"Mike," says Jimmy, stepping forward and once again moving between the two men. "It's not what you think."

"Then explain it to me, please. As far as I'm concerned this all happened yesterday and I'm still trying to wake up. Explain it."

Jimmy and Popkiss exchange a look. "Masters didn't completely lie," Jimmy tells Mike. "After you disappeared and the Doc died, things got pretty tough. We didn't realize how much we had depended on the Doc for all the contracts we'd established. A lot of our funding dried up. We got numerous . . . offers for the remaining Supercar system, like the engine designs and Clear-Vu. But we didn't want to give them up completely."

"So you let Masterspy have them?" Mike is incredulous.

"It wasn't dot easy," Popkiss exclaims. "We knew Masterspy was behind many of the covert attempts to purchase Supercar systems. If we had sold them under those conditions then Masterspy would've owned und controlled them outright."

"On the other hand," Jimmy continues, "if we allowed Masterspy to take over funding of the entire project . . . on our terms . . . then we'd be in a position to ride herd on any developments he made. Mike, it was a choice. Either come under Masterspy's control and have our hands safely on the goodies---"

"---or lose them altogether. Right." Mike sighs and nods. "Yeah. OK. Makes sense."

"Und there's been another consideration," Popkiss slowly says.

"Oh?"

Popkiss looks at Jimmy who wordlessly hands Mike a hand computer. Mike accepts it and looks at the small screen, immediately recognizing the sight before him.

"Mitch!"

"Yah," agrees Popkiss with a sad nod.

Mike looks up at him and Jimmy. "He's still alive?"

"In a way," sighs Jimmy. "He's in storage, sleeping in one of the cryogenic research cells which is part of a project Masters has been funding. A sort of suspended animation. Masters was going to kill him outright . . ."

"But then he decided that, by keeping Mitch alive, he keeps us under control," Popkiss finishes. "He's been holding Mitch's life over our heads as a threat. We suspect he plans to also use Mitch as a lever to convince you to fly to Leap Frog."

Mike stares morosely at the computer screen. "Dammit."

"We haven't been completely helpless all this time," Popkiss insists softly. "We've been able to keep Mastervorks from fully developing the Clear-Vu. We farmed out some of the technology to the Japanese electronics daibatsus, establishink a global technological balance of

power throughout the consumer electronics market.”

“We also kept the SC-2K engines from being as powerful, or as reliable, as the originals on board Supercar,” Jimmy adds, “but just barely. Actually the SC-2K’s a pretty sweet machine in some respects.”

Mike is still nodding, taking it in. “OK...I’m convinced you guys are on the ball. I see your point. But working for Masterspy, and Zarin, is still a risky proposition. You know them. If they even suspect you’ve been running interference they’d kill you and Mitch.”

“Wee know, but Masterspy has gained enough technology to keep him rich und powerful und happy for the time being. Und besides...there’s interference, und there’s interference.”

* * * * *

Masters is staring at the young woman standing before his desk. “Jan . . . Farnsworth?”

“Solicitor with the firm of Moran, Morcar, Farnsworth & Clay,” Jan replies. Today she’s looking very trim and professional and is coldly staring Masters down. “My firm also represents the interests of the Eurotech Combine, as well as advising the Ministry Of Economics.”

“Most impressive. And why is one so blessed with responsibility visiting me?”

Jan has taken some papers from her briefcase and is laying them on the desk. “I am also the family solicitor for the Farnsworth estate in Great Britain, as well as its global holdings. My aunt, Miss Felicity Farnsworth,” Jan nods at the older woman quietly sitting on the nearby couch, “is here on business with your company and has retained me as legal and financial advisor.”

Masters fortunes Felicity with a small nod and returns his attention to Jan. “Indeed. Pray continue.”

“Mister Masters, the documents I’ve placed on your desk represent a list of international patents which were registered by my late uncle: Doctor Horatio Beaker. I’ve also attached a copy of his last will and testament in which he established a trust fund to be regularly transferred from all profits arising from said patents to the Farnsworth-Beaker family members.”

Masters gives the documents a brief glance.

“Since the death of my uncle some eight years ago, the Farnsworth-Beaker family has patiently waited for the established funds to be granted. They have not and, having passed through all the necessary international channels, I am now formally charging that your company owes the Farnsworth-Beaker family some three hundred and twenty-two billion pounds in arrears, and I have already filed motions with the International Court and the American State Department in this regards.”

Dead silence in the office, up until the point Felicity looks up from her needlepoint to favor the nearby Zarin with a friendly nod. “You should try and smile a little, dear,” she softly points out to him. “It will relax the facial muscles.”

Masters finally finishes his silent appraisal of Jan. “Young Lady,” he murmurs, “it is not my intention to fall back on triteness . . . but are you totally out of your mind?”

“She graduated with honors from Cambridge,” Felicity points out cheerfully. “I don’t think they let you do that if you’re out of your mind.”

Masters fixes Felicity with an extremely cold stare.

"Not often, in any case."

"Auntifel," Jan softly chides. She returns her attention to Masters. "I am serious, Mr. Masters. Quite serious."

"You actually expect me to hand over three billion dollars to you and your family?"

"Not all at once," Jan replies from behind a small smile. "I have taken the liberty of drawing up a payment schedule which should satisfy my clients requirements most satisfactorily. You are free to have your legal representatives examine the documents and make a determination for yourself. In the meantime, my aunt and I shall be staying at Ormsby House in Carson City."

Masters is attempting to slowly skewer Jan with his eyes. "Ms. Farnsworth . . . certainly you anticipate my reaction to this . . . extortion."

Jan almost looks kindly. "Extortion, Mister Masters, is a rather weighty term. But please keep in mind two things. First, it is true that I have anticipated your reaction and your possible reluctance to comply with these . . . requests. So has the British Government. So has Rolls-Royce, British Aerospace, Aerospatiale and numerous other companies in the Eurotech Combine which have depended upon the fruits of my uncle's work."

Masters manages to look more evil than usual.

"And also keep in mind that, before his death, my aunt and my uncle maintained a rather healthy correspondence. Quite a bit of it mentioned you. And my uncle, Mister Masters, had an extremely meticulous regard for facts. Something to keep in mind if you decide to pursue this matter in a courtroom." Jan nods at him. "I'll be awaiting your response, sir. Good day. Come, Auntifel."

Jan and Felicity leave the office. Behind them, Masters is still sitting behind his desk, looking like a cobra which had just received a severe beating from a steel rod. His expression is not at all nice.

"Friend Zarin," he finally murmurs.

"Yes?"

"A lesson to be learned here. If someone is a problem to you, keep in mind that the relatives could also turn out to be difficult."

"What are your orders, Master?"

Masters is staring down at the documents. Slowly his hand covers them. "Let us wait for the moment. Time may prove to be helpful . . . especially with Mercury's help."

* * * * *

Mike, Popkiss and Jimmy are landing the SC-2K back on its pad. Leaving the craft, Mike spots Jan Farnsworth and Aunt Felicity leaving the administration building. "Hey!"

Jan and Felicity stops, and Jan regards Mike with calm interest as he comes closer.

"You were the one out in the desert," Mike says. "It was you I saw . . . hey! Felicity!"

"Hello, Mister Mercury dear," Felicity replies with a smile. "I am pleased to see you weren't smashed all to bits on the hard desert. This is my niece Jan."

Mike nods with more than polite interest at Jan. Behind him Popkiss and Jimmy join the group.

For her part Jan Farnsworth is regarding Mike with classic British cool. "You seem well, Mister Mercury."

"I've been shaken up, yeah, but I'm OK now. All things considered. Felicity, what're you . . . and Jan . . . doing here?"

"Something legal regarding my dear cousin Horatio's money," Felicity replies brightly. "As Jan explained it to me it involves balls and a vise. Did I get it right, dear?"

"Auntifel," Jan murmurs to the other woman. Her eyes are still icing the surrounding air somewhat. "Returned to our time only a few days, and already working for Masters I see."

Mike looks as if he's been struck in the head with an axe. "No! I mean . . . no! I'm not working for Masters. I'm . . ."

"Associating with the lap dogs who licked Masters' arse after my uncle died," Jan finishes, her eyes staring daggers at Popkiss and Jimmy. "Helping to hand over my uncle's property to him."

Popkiss sighs. "Jan . . ."

Mike feels a boil coming on inside him. "Look . . . Miss Farnsworth . . . I've only been involved in this situation a few days. I'm the Tail-End Charlie around here and, unlike the rest of you, I haven't yet learned to fit in. You might want to stand back a bit and collect all the facts before you convict me. Here's the first one: I am not helping Masterspy."

"Mister Mercury, I know all about facts," Jan replies coldly. "I have been trained to deal in them and, right now, the available evidence doesn't speak well for your defense."

"Then maybe you ought to stay for the rest of the trial," Mike says, crossing his arms.

"Oh I intend to . . . all the way to the hanging. Come, Auntifel."

Jan stalks off, but Felicity remains behind and gently touches Mike's arm. "Something you might want to know, Mister Mercury. Jan is unattached and can be rather passionate when she's not engaged in legal matters."

"Auntifel!"

"And I embarrass her quite often," Felicity adds. "At her age she can stand it. Coming dear. Very satisfactory having you back, Mister Mercury. Now I'm positive the villains will be thrashed soundly. Ta!" With a cheery wave she waddles off to join her niece who is trying to ignore a rather prominent blush.

Mike watches them leave, his eyes lingering sourly on Jan's departing figure. "I've only met three women since I've been through the wormhole," he comments to Jimmy and Popkiss. "Felicity, the Rhinemaiden and Madam Churchill over there. I'm not having much fun."

"We should've told you about her," Popkiss remarks. "She's been pushing against Masters for quite some time. We knew she was getting ready to finally make a direct move, but didn't know it'd be now."

"I thought she was still in Geneva filing motions," Jimmy commented.

"Yah."

"So the two of you knew about her?" Mike asks.

Jimmy nods, "Oh sure."

"And you never tried to explain to her about your real motives for being here?"

Jimmy looks at Mike oddly. "Explain something?"

"To Jan Farnsworth?" Popkiss adds.

"Doc Beaker's niece?" Jimmy finishes.

Mike nods ruefully. "Yeah. Point."

Unknown to the trio, someone is quietly watching them from near a hangar door. It's Berta Karsendorf and she's monitoring their conversation with the aid of an electronic device she's wearing.

* * * * *

Midnight at Masterworks. Most of the complex is still bright and busy with activity, but parts of it are dark.

The door to Popkiss' office softly opens. A solitary figure slips inside and quietly moves across the floor to the computer.

Fingers begin moving across the keyboard. A screen lights up and we see that the silent intruder is Mike. He glances over his shoulder, making sure he's alone, then returns his attention to the computer screen. Where would it be?

His fingers type SEARCH: BEAKER.

Somewhere else in the Masterworks complex. A figure quickly moves through a darkened room and approaches a monitor screen which is announcing COMPUTER OPERATIONAL/POPKISS OFFICE.

The figure moves closer and we see it's Berta Karsendorf fastening a robe around herself. She's frowning at the screen.

POPKISS CODES NOT IN USE. SECURITY ALERT.

Berta quickly begins typing on her own keyboard. A new message appears on the screen. DISABLE POPKISS SECURITY ALERT. CODE: ÜBERWAGEN.

In Popkiss' office Mike continues to study the screen. It's being filled with all sorts of error messages, and he's desperately touching the keys, trying to straighten the tangle out.

"So maybe it wouldn't have hurt to peek at the hint book," he mutters.

In her office, Berta is watching her own screens, two fingers thoughtfully touching her lips. She reaches down and types a few instructions. Her screen replies with REMOTE REBOOT/TERMINAL POPKISS.

In Popkiss' office Mike suddenly sits back, eyes widening as his screen clears and begins settling down to something resembling normalcy. "Okay," he admits. "However I did it, hooray for me." He watches his screen fill with lines of information and carefully scrolls through, searching.

"Something in plain English might help," he murmurs.

Berta is continuing to watch the activity on her screens. She types in more instructions.

Mike stops his search as he spots something. "This might help," he admits, looking at a file marked SUPERCAR-II CRASH.

Mike leans closer, his expression intent.

* * * * *

The next day finds Felicity enjoying breakfast at a table in her hotel room. Jan is sitting across from her, staring into her laptop computer and holding a cup of coffee.

"You should try and eat something, dear," Felicity comments.

"The beta avatars for Sarpa Rakta have just completed their analysis of the proposal we

sent them," Jan replies, still reading the screen. "They might swing over to our side against Masters if we can promise them an exclusive distribution option for the MHD construction contract awards throughout the Subcontinent."

"Some toast at least, then."

"I can get into the chat room with Secretary Ramphoei before she goes to bed and secure her assurance of unconditional support for our patent suit, especially as it applies to the tariff situation throughout her region. I think I've bookmarked all of Uncle Horatio's former contacts there."

"No jam or honey . . . just toast."

"I'd love to get Japan into bed with us."

Felicity looks up. "Pardon?"

"Mister Mitsui hinted that he'd consider private negotiations with us if we could assure no interruptions in contract agreements. It makes no difference to him who owns the patents as long as his bank remains in control of supervising industrial investment throughout that region."

Felicity is still trying to catch up. "How many people in bed?"

Jan sighs. "Dammit. I may have to fly to Osaka before the end of the month."

"Oh how nice. And Mister Mercury is an excellent pilot."

Jan gives her aunt a long soft glare over the top of the computer. "Auntifel . . . I appreciate what you're trying to do. But believe me: Mike Mercury is the last person I need to deal with right this moment."

The door to the room opens and Mike comes in. "Hi."

Both women look at him. Jan is open-mouthed.

"He used to do that quite a bit in the old days," Felicity says, picking up her tea and blowing on it. "Good morning, Mike dear. Breakfast?"

Mike is looking around as Jimmy and Popkiss also enter the room. "Have you been checking for bugs?"

"No dear," Felicity replies, "we've been climbing into bed with Japan."

"We need to talk," Mike tells Jan, coming up to her.

Jan's regaining her composure. "I don't think we need to involve you or Popkiss or Gibson in these negotiations---"

"I've come across some evidence---"

"I have been managing quite well on my own---"

"Last night I went through some of the old files---"

"Did Masters send you here because, if he did---"

Mike suddenly puts his hand over Jan's mouth.

"She will bite," Felicity points out. "Did so often as a baby."

Mike is ignoring her and is concentrating on Jan. "I appreciate the fact that you're educated and dedicated and in control and efficient," he tells her. "I've also never hit a woman before, but you're really starting to tempt me."

Jan angrily pushes his hand away. "I'm not so reserved," she hisses and smacks him hard across the face.

Mike glares at her, wide-eyed, his hand ready to respond . . . but he's struggling to bring himself under control.

"Puts me in mind of Sunday Chapel," Felicity comments, reaching for the teapot.

"Miss Farnsworth---" Mike slowly begins.

At this point Popkiss moves between the combatants. "Mike . . . Jan . . . both of you know this is not the way to work. Stop it! Now!"

Mike and Jan continue glaring at each other.

"Very well, Mister Mercury," Jan finally replies, her eyes hot. "Say what's on your mind and get out. The floor belongs to the three of you."

"To Mike, actually," Jimmy says.

"Jan, we have no idea what Mike has found," Popkiss adds. "He's refused to talk until we met mit you und Felicity."

"This all sounds very exciting," Felicity says. "Are we going to be in danger again soon?"

"Maybe," Mike says, pacing about. "I broke into the Professor's computer files last night and studied the details of Doc Beaker's death."

"We've studied them as well," Jan replies.

Mike stares at her, then turns to Popkiss and Jimmy. "Why wasn't a search made for the bodies of Doc and Bill?"

Popkiss and Jimmy glance at each other. "Mike---" begins Popkiss.

"Supercar-II blew up at an altitude of twenty-eight thousand feet over the Pacific," Jimmy breaks in. "Traveling at Mach five. You don't get . . . bodies after something like that."

"Und there vas no sign of the ejection seats," Popkiss adds. "No tracking signals."

"My family did make an attempt," Jan says. "We asked the Japanese authorities, the Australians, we alerted both the International Red Cross and International Rescue---"

"Nothing was found, Mike," Felicity says softly, sadly.

Mike resumes pacing, nodding to himself. "Nothing was meant to be found."

Silence in the room until Popkiss goes "What?"

Mike turns to him. "What first alerted you to the Supercar-II explosion?"

"Ach . . . that vas simple. The blast accompanied a massive magnetic pulse of a type which only Supercar's magnetohydrodynamic systems could produce. It vas as characteristic as a fingerprint."

Mike nods. "Exactly! You focus the MHD coil emissions aft of the flight path, then jettison the fuel supply into the resulting conic field. The ignition of the fuel coincides with a magnetic pulse that scrambles all sensor systems which might be directed at the area. Doc Beaker and I discussed this maneuver a few weeks ago . . . or eight years back rather."

"Maneuver?" asks Jimmy.

Mike nods excitedly. "If Supercar had to fly into a heavily radar-intensive zone, or knew it was being closely tracked, then the maneuver would make it appear as if it had blown up, or maybe hit by a missile or something. The fuel for flying would be gone, but Supercar could still be safely piloted into the water for submersible travel. Obviously, though, the Doc and I considered this to be a last-ditch scheme."

Jan is slowly standing up, her mouth open. "Mister Mercury . . . are you trying to say that Supercar-II didn't blow up?"

Mike is looking steadily at her. "I don't think it did."

"Then Uncle Horatio is still alive?"

"I intend to find out," Mike softly replies, half to himself.

End Issue Two

Issue #3: "Transit Of Mercury"

The next day finds Mike at the controls of Supercar. The test bed is surrounded by a ring of Masterworks guards, with Zarin among them.

"Pilot to Console," Mike says. "Ready to begin shakedown test flight. Charging engines."

"Console to Pilot," Popkiss' voice replies from a speaker. "Proceed."

Supercar's high-powered whine begins to fill the air.

His eyes on the vehicle and Mike, Zarin speaks into a radio. "Master, is this wise? Allowing Mercury to pilot Supercar?"

In his office Masters is watching the test on a giant screen. "I have examined the risks," he replies to Zarin. "Unfortunately, if we wish to acquire the Leap Frog satellite, we must move as rapidly as possible. Mercury is the only qualified Supercar pilot with astronaut training. He is also the most familiar with handling the original prototype and is best able to determine if Popkiss and Gibson's repairs have been adequate."

"Interlock on," Popkiss announces.

"Fire one," Mike replies, and the port engines prime themselves with a burst of power.

"Fire two," and the starboard engines follow.

"We have both Popkiss and Gibson in our hands," Masters assures Zarin. "As well as that damned monkey they consider so precious. Also keep in mind the pursuit craft already launched and holding position all around us in case Mercury should try something. This time, Friend Zarin, we hold more cards than ever before."

"Roof doors opening," Popkiss' voice says.

Above Supercar the Block One roof slides open.

"Selecting vertical takeoff," Mike replies. Slowly, but with increasing speed, Supercar rises off the test stand and out of the building, sunlight glinting on its hull.

"So far so good, Jim," Mike reports. "Handles real smooth."

"Console to Pilot," Popkiss says. "Entering specified plan for test flight. We must make sure we follow all details to the letter."

"Don't worry," assures Mike, his hand moving the throttle. "I intend to."

Supercar moves away from Masterworks, skimming wide out over the desert and increasing speed.

In his office Masters nods at the images on his screen. "Popkiss and Gibson did well," he murmurs. "And Mercury is still as proficient as ever at flying."

"Console to Pilot," Popkiss says. "Ready to begin high speed test."

"Pilot to Console," Mike replies. "Flight plan clear. Going to supersonic."

Supercar increases speed, moving further away. The desert peace is soon shattered by a sonic boom.

In his office, Masters is frowning as he notices the blip of Supercar gaining distance. He touches a button on his console. "Masters to Mercury."

Silence for a moment. Then: "Go ahead . . . Masters."

"Exactly how far are you planning on taking Supercar?"

In the cockpit, Mike pushes the throttle to maximum.

"All the way," he murmurs.

Supercar booms on through the sky.

"Console to Pilot," Popkiss' voice reports, "your speed is approaching Mach six."

Masters leans closer over his console. "Mercury, return to Masterworks."

Silence.

"Mercury . . . do you hear me?"

"Console to Pilot . . . speed is now Mach six point three and climbing."

Masters stabs at his console. "Popkiss . . . call Mercury back at once."

"Mike is in the middle of a high speed run---"

"Call him back now!" Masters roars.

A pause, then: "Console to Pilot, you are ordered to return to base."

No response. On the screen the blip indicating Supercar continues to move further away.

Masters touches another button. "Zarin . . . order pursuit craft to intercept Mercury and force him back."

"Yes, Master," Zarin replies. "One has already broken formation and is following closely."

Masters looks to see that a blip representing a SC-2K has begun following Supercar. He smiles in satisfaction.

"Popkiss . . . use the remote control function. Try to return Supercar."

"We are trying everything," Popkiss says. "Nothing seems to work from our end."

Masters is suddenly feeling very suspicious. He looks at the screen to see the pursuing SC-2K gaining ground on the fleeing Supercar. "Zarin, what orders did you give the pilots of the pursuit craft?"

"All six pilots have been instructed to use whatever means necessary short of irreparably damaging Supercar," Zarin replies. "I gave them their orders personally."

"Six pilots," Masters murmurs softly, his eyes narrowing at the screen. "Zarin!"

"Master?"

"You said six pursuit pilots . . . but I see seven pursuit craft airborne." Quickly Masters focuses his display on the pursuing SC-2K. An image appears revealing it to be one of the cargo-variant craft. An additional readout reports: LONG-DURATION FUEL POD LOADED.

"Zarin!"

"Master?"

"Go to the control room. Bring me Popkiss and Gibson now!"

Zarin, accompanied by a squad of Masterworks security personnel, runs to the central control room. Arriving at the door he finds it locked. Stepping back he motions a quick order to one of the guards who levels his weapon and fires, shattering the lock. Zarin kicks the door open and enters the room, finding the consoles active, the instruments working, but no one

there.

“Master! Popkiss and Gibson are not here.”

Masters roars his anger at the screen.

Meanwhile, far away, Supercar is matching course and speed with the cargo-variant SC-2K that has followed it. “Everything going smoothly, Professor?” Mike asks.

“So far so good,” Popkiss replies from the cockpit of the other craft. “It was one thing to pilot Supercar by remote control from the console. It was another thing, though, to pilot the console by remote control from a Supercar. We have Jan and Felicity on board. I’m afraid our little deception back at the base has fallen through, though.”

The Clear-Vu display suddenly flickers, and Masters face appears.

“Do you read me, Mercury?” he asks.

“More than I particularly care to,” Mike replies, his attention still on the controls.

“You know you won’t succeed at whatever you have in mind.”

“Life is full of disappointments.”

“You may have Supercar, Popkiss and Gibson . . . but you’ve forgotten your little simian friend. Return to base immediately, or he’ll be switched off.”

“You won’t hurt Mitch,” Mike says.

“Indeed. I’m curious to know the reason behind your assurance.”

“Because you want Leap Frog. And I’m going to get you what you need most to make it work.”

“Explain.”

“Beaker.”

Long silence. “Beaker died eight years ago.”

“I think not. And he’s the only one who can make Leap Frog completely operational.”

From the Clear-Vu screen Masters studies Mike like a shark regarding a bleeding lump of meat. “Beaker is dead.”

Mike shakes his head. “I’ve got information you don’t, and I plan on bringing him back.”

“You could have told me about Beaker back at base, rather than attempting this.”

Mike shakes his head. “No. We’re doing this my way.”

Another long silence. “I don’t trust you, Mercury.”

Mike lets out a short bark of laughter. “That’s what I love about our relationship, Masterspy. Complete agreement of our mutual feelings for each other.”

“You will return with Beaker and Supercar within seventy-two hours.”

Mike glances at the Clear-Vu. “Or?”

“Or find yourself a new monkey.”

Mike switches off the Clear-Vu.

Both Supercar and the cargo ship race off towards the west.

* * * * *

Zarin enters Masters’ office. “They have vanished off the radar, Master. They have escaped us.”

Masters is calmly at work at his computer. “It occurs to me, Friend Zarin, that Mercury

might be telling us the truth. He may actually be going to rescue Beaker.”

Zarin comes closer. “Is it possible, then, that Beaker is actually alive after all this time?”

“If so.” Masters muses, “it also occurs to me that, for once in this situation, all my enemies will conveniently be in one location. And, if Beaker is indeed alive, then I possess numerous means to recover the good Doctor and his knowledge of controlling Leap Frog. Mercury could possibly become expendable.”

“But Master . . . Mercury has not informed us where he believes Beaker to be. We have no way of knowing where Supercar is going.”

“Not quite, Friend Zarin.”

Zarin moves closer to see what Masters is studying on the computer screen. The name of a single file: SUPERCAR-II CRASH.

“Not quite,” Masters repeats softly.

* * * * *

Supercar and the SC-2K are soaring over the Pacific.

“I may get rapped on the knuckles for this,” Jan is saying, “but why is it so important that we care about this monkey we left back at the base?”

“Jan!” Felicity chides.

“I knew I was going to get yelled at---”

“Mitch has saved our lives more than once,” declares Mike from Supercar, “which is more than I can say for some female lawyers---”

“I’m sorry, all right?”

“There’s something else to consider,” Popkiss says.

“Like what?” asks Mike.

“You remember one of Beaker’s ongoing projects? His experiments mit coding information into chemical substances? He was working on it before we began the Leap Frog project.”

Mike nods. “Yeah. That was a pretty wild idea of the Doc’s.”

“It was more than that. Jimmy and I never wanted to mention it back at the base, but Beaker actually succeeded more than anyone could imagine. He developed a means to code hard information into chemical form using a derivative of ribonucleic acid.”

“Well that’s interesting, Prof, but---”

“Let me finish, Mike. Beaker ran tests using Mitch and succeeded. He managed to reproduce certain items into chemical storage within Mitch’s brain.”

“Certain items?”

“For instance: the entire specifications and files concerning Supercar.”

Mike almost loses control of his flying and steadies himself. “Prof . . . you mean all the Supercar specs are inside Mitch’s brain?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy replies. “After you and the Doc disappeared we tried to extract the information, but couldn’t figure out how to do it without harming Mitch. Then Masterspy took over the operation and immediately put Mitch into deep freeze.”

“And neither of you dared tell Masterspy what Mitch was carrying.” Mike nods to himself. “Incredible.”

"So if the Doc is still alive," begins Jimmy.

"We'd have all the Supercar files," Mike finishes. "OK people . . . let's push on. Now all we need is something of an idea where we're heading. I found out where the prototype went down but, for the life of me, I can't figure out why the Doc and Bill would've been flying out there. I checked the course Supercar-II was taking, and it was nowhere near any of Felicity's Southeast Asia holdings."

"Actually," Jan remarks slowly, "Auntifel and I may have an idea on that account."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Mike," Felicity chimes in. "Looking at where you said Horatio and Mister Gibson went down, it would only be another few hundred miles further on."

"Where?" Mike asks the women.

"Before the Leap Frog project, Uncle Horatio was writing Auntifel about an island in the Pacific he'd heard about," Jan explains. "Halfway between Australia and the Kiribati group. It was called . . . oh-hhhhh . . ."

"Kyoryo," Felicity supplies. "Horatio was very excited about it. Although the island was considered to be rather inaccessible, it was rumored to possess all sorts of unusual botanical specimens. He often mentioned going there to conduct research once work with Leap Frog was completed."

"Kyoryo," Mike muses.

* * * * *

At the Phoenix, Arizona Cryogenics labs of Masterworks Technologies, Inc. a silent dark warehouse holds rows and rows of steel containers, each one identified by a small electronic readout.

A tech is hanging up the phone. He looks as if he'd eaten something that didn't agree with him.

"That was Masters himself," he tells his associate. "We're to pull pod 6060842 and prep it for disposal if we get the word."

"If we get the word," echoes the other. "Why all the mystery? What's in the pod anyway?"

The tech is examining the records. "Experimental animal . . . holy crap! Been in suspension for over five years. Authorized by Masters himself."

"So I guess he doesn't like pets anymore. I'll go get the pod." The man goes into the warehouse and suddenly stops. "What th---"

The automated crane system is in motion, rapidly shuffling containers about the warehouse. Not only that, but the identifying readouts on each container have all gone blank.

The tech joins his partner out in the warehouse. "Oh hell," he comments. "Pull the main breaker, hurry."

His partner does so and the crane grinds to a halt.

"Great," the tech moans. "It'll take days to sort all this out."

"Must've been a computer glitch or something," his partner remarks from the control booth.

At Masterworks, Berta Karsendorf silently sits back in her chair, her eyes still watching her computer screen. On it is the layout of the Phoenix cryogenics warehouse, with one container blinking.

* * * * *

"Mike," announces Jimmy.

"What is it, Jimmy?"

"Are you picking up something behind us?"

Mike makes an adjustment to Clear-Vu and studies the display. "Something approaching from high altitude at tremendous speed." He touches the blip and it expands to produce a lethal silhouette. "Jim, what am I seeing?"

"Combat variant SC-2K on an intercept course," Jimmy answers.

Mike softly swears. "Keep on course for Kyoryo," he tells the others, "and I'll see what I can do."

"Are you carrying any weapons?" Jan's voice asks.

"Me and an attitude," Mike replies, throttling back and changing course. "Always worked before. Wish me luck." He begins gaining altitude, heading for the approaching craft.

"Supercar to approaching SC-2K," he announces. "Declare yourself."

Clear-Vu quickly announces TARGETING SENSORS LOCKED ON SUPERCAR and Mike immediately banks over, narrowly missing being sliced in two by lasers.

"Answered that question," Mike mutters. He continues banking over, heading into a steep dive. Behind him the attacking craft soars into pursuit.

"OK, fella," Mike murmurs, "let's see who wears the long pants here."

Both ships begin a rapid chase through the sky, with Mike sending Supercar into a continually changing series of aerobatic maneuvers to avoid being skewered by the other vehicle's lasers.

In the gradually departing cargo ship Mike's progress is closely being watched on the radar display. "He's absolutely crazy," Jan declares.

"Yes, dear," replies Felicity calmly, "and thank goodness."

Behind them Mike makes a high powered dive which ends in him flattening Supercar out over the ocean, skimming low over the water. His attacker follows suit, and Mike gains altitude again, narrowly missing another laser barrage. He goes into another dive.

"That's right," he quietly urges the other craft. "Keep on my tail."

The attacker follows and both ships head once more for the surface of the ocean. This time, instead of pulling out, Mike plunges Supercar into the water. The other pilot, anticipating a repeat of the first dive, pulls out and narrowly clips his hull on the water.

Below the water, Mike is carefully studying his instruments, making adjustments. Clear-Vu suddenly announces SONAR IMPACT RECORDED/CONGRUENT WITH VEHICLE SUBMERGENCE.

The screen shifts to showing a blip rapidly approaching Mike. "Playtime once again," he says and leans on the throttle.

On board the pursuing craft the display shows Supercar pulling away. A smile slowly

passes over the face of Josh Dodson who begins heading for the surface. Once there he waits, but not for long. Supercar bursts out of the water and, at the same moment, the enemy pilot fires. The lasers arc ahead and Supercar suddenly disappears into a brilliant ball of fire that obscures all vision.

"Pursuit Snark to Base," Dodson. He makes another adjustment, clearing the interference. "Pursuit Snark to Base. Supercar and Mercury destroyed. I have sustained minor damage but can be airborne again within the hour."

Masters' face appears on the screen. "Excellent," he says. "It is regrettable that we had to sacrifice the prototype, but we'll soon have Beaker. Proceed at best speed towards Kyoryo."

End Issue Three

Issue #4: "Mercury Steady"

Far ahead, and under the sea, Supercar cruises rapidly away from the scene. Inside, Mike is carefully regaining control.

"It worked for the Doc . . . nice to see it works for me as well. I can make Kyoryo the rest of the way underwater on turbo thrusters."

"We read you, Mike," Popkiss' voice replies. "We'll be arriving in a half hour and will transmit coordinates to you."

Mike nods, guiding Supercar further into the depths.

* * * * *

Some time later Mike is studying a contour map on Clear-Vu.

"As you can see," Popkiss' voice explains, "they were right about Kyoryo being relatively inaccessible. I suspect the entire island is a collapsed volcanic cone. The only place for a ship to come close is at a narrow inlet on the northern shore . . . here."

Mike is nodding. "Might be too narrow for Supercar but, if Doc and Bill were still alive, that's where they'd head for. I'll make it my destination. Any sign from the air?"

"I've been scanning the island surface ever since we came into range," Jimmy replies. "Someone's down there. I've been getting what looks like signs of irrigation trenches along the river that flows into the inlet."

"Yeah well, don't get your hopes up too much. I might've rolled a big zero here."

"Apparently Masterspy doesn't think so," Felicity comments, "or he wouldn't have sent that very rude attacker."

Mike nods again, "Which reminds me, keep a sharp eye out. You people are vulnerable."

"We'll be landing near the inlet," Popkiss reports. "We'll wait for you there."

Mike pilots Supercar closer to the island, scanning with Clear-Vu. Something catches his attention and he focuses on it. "Say . . ."

The "something" turns out to be an underwater cave opening. Mike probes with Clear-

Vu, which reveals a tunnel leading deep into the island itself. The tunnel is just wide enough to accommodate a vehicle the size of Supercar.

"Just what the Doc would be looking for," he muses. "Supercar to Popkiss. Professor, I've found an underwater tunnel leading into the island. It might be nothing, but I'm going to check it out."

No answer and Mike notices how deep he's gone. "Might be too deep now to communicate," he concludes. "I'll poke around a bit then surface and get in contact."

Switching on underwater lights, Mike guides Supercar into the tunnel.

* * * * *

On the island, Popkiss and Jimmy have landed their ship alongside the inlet and, accompanied by Jan and Felicity, are looking about. Jimmy and Popkiss are wearing backpacks.

"Most comfortable," Felicity exclaims.

Jan is fanning herself, keeping her immediate remarks inside.

Felicity is pointing at some nearby moss. "Incredible. I've never seen growth that extensive in this part of the world. And those ferns over there. Most curious."

"I can see why the Doc would be interested," Jimmy remarks. "This island seems to be some sort of botanical throwback, like that portion of Australia they found a few years ago."

Jan is wrinkling her nose. "What's that odor?"

"I've been noticing it too," Popkiss remarks with a nod. "Sort of overly sweet."

Felicity had been kneeling near the edge of the plant growth and is now standing up, brushing her hands delicately on her outfit. "There's a great deal of fungi and mold to be found here. Depending upon the rapidity of the growth there'd be an enormous amount of decay and decomposition taking place. The air is probably filled with all sorts of spores which is what we're smelling."

"Oh lovely," Jan remarks sourly.

"Now dear, you took a Girl Guide badge in woodcraft."

"No . . . I took a Girl Guide badge in civics. All I got in woodcraft was a bite on the unmentionable from a marmot."

Jimmy glances at Popkiss, his eyes asking a bite on the---

Popkiss quietly shakes his head. "Let's move on," he announces. "We'll leave a trail for Mike."

"Not that there's too many ways to move here," Jan remarks, beginning to poke her way about some large rocks and following the bank of the inlet. Despite her complaints she's rather limber and easily makes her way along a narrow trail. "I guess it would be too much to hope that Uncle Horatio and Mister Gibson could've left some form of sign or marker . . ."

Her voice fades away and the others are following. "They might not have landed here," Jimmy points out.

"But they weren't able to fly, if Mike was correct," Popkiss points out. "This is the only place on the island where the Supercar-II could reach a shoreline of sorts."

No response from ahead. "Jan?" asks Felicity.

Still no response. "Jan," repeats Felicity, "we are not sneaking about. Make a noise of some sort."

They round a bend of the inlet and find Jan standing there. And, just ahead of her, the group sees an object which has been disassembled, covered with growth, faded from exposure to the elements but is, nonetheless, recognizable as the Supercar-II prototype.

Jimmy starts to rush forward. "They did make it---"

Jan suddenly grabs his arm and points. Jim follows her finger, the others looking in the same direction.

Eight people are standing among some trees, pointing bamboo spears at Jan and the others. One of them, seemingly the leader, appears fundamentally different from his companions. Despite his extensive tan it is immediately evident that he is not native to the island but is, instead . . .

"Bill," Jimmy exclaims joyfully.

With a sudden savage roar Bill Gibson and his companions rush the group, their spears at the ready.

* * * * *

Elsewhere on the island, Supercar floats to the surface of a large pool.

Inside, Mike is studying the surroundings on Clear-Vu. "Almost at the center of the island," he comments to himself. "Not bad. Supercar to Popkiss. Come in, Professor."

No answer.

Mike adjusts the communicator controls. "Professor? Jimmy? Felicity?" A pause. "Jan?"

Still silence. Mike adjusts Clear-Vu, picking up a faint blip. "Getting telemetry from the cargo ship," he mutters, "but nothing else."

Opening the canopy Mike cautiously slips out, taking a backpack and his gun. He looks around, studying his surroundings carefully before stepping onto the part of Supercar nearest the edge of the pool and nimbly jumping over the water onto the ground.

He takes his hand radio and tries again to raise the others. "Calling Popkiss. Professor?"

Still no answer, but Mike's ears are suddenly picking up something else: the unmistakable sound of a Supercar diving through the air. He glances up, then quickly dives into the thick plant growth as twin laser beams spear downwards, slicing neat holes into the rear of Supercar's fuselage. A moment later, and the attacking Snark-variant zooms rapidly overhead.

"I am really starting to get tired of that guy," Mike mutters as he begins slipping deeper into the forest.

Above him, Dodson is gaining altitude. "Pursuit Snark to Base," he says. "I've reached the island and have overflowed it. Supercar was floating in a lagoon."

Masters' face re-appears on the console screen. "For some reason I find myself surprised not in the least," he says tiredly. "Beaker, after all, survived a similar explosion eight years ago. Is there any sign of the second Supercar, or the others in their ship?"

"The other ship has landed on the northern shore. I have not located the second prototype."

"Continue searching, and make sure Supercar does not leave."

"I have already taken steps and have disabled the engines with my lasers."

Masters nods. "Excellent. Continue overflying the island and search for Beaker with your sensors. If the cargo ship attempts to take off then disable it, but do not destroy it. I am tracking your position and am sending support ships to help in locating Beaker."

As he speaks a force of five combat-variant and two cargo SC-2K's are roaring in formation over the ocean, heading for Kyoryo.

Meanwhile, Mike is stealthily moving among the trees when he hears the attacker approaching again. Once again the lasers appear from above, lancing through the trees and neatly slicing a few.

You've got no idea where I am, Mike thinks. You're trying to flush me out. Looking for game. Keep it up, stud, and you'll find it.

Mike moves towards the edge of a ravine and pauses as he hears the attacker making another run. He ducks, hiding himself as the lasers hiss overhead, slicing more trees. One of them, unfortunately, falls too near and dislodges Mike from his position, causing him to roll down the slope of the ravine. He reaches the bottom, shakes himself a bit uncomfortably, and tries to rise . . .

To find himself staring at the points of bamboo spears held by natives.

* * * * *

Mike is taken under guard to a village consisting of huts and tree platforms hidden within the forest. The village is pressed up against a high rock wall which features several small caves. He notices that his destination, though, is a large circular clearing. At its center is an upthrust outcropping of rock upon which leans a huge bowl of black shining volcanic glass tilted towards the sky. Around this are the villagers, all of them watching as Mike is brought forward.

Only one person doesn't pay too much attention. He is sitting tailor-fashion in the center of the bowl, surrounded by piles of mushrooms, seemingly meditating on some small objects he's moving about. Behind him his image is distorted and magnified by the surface of the bowl. Dressed in rags, wizened, bearded, his skin browned by the sun . . . but Mike recognizes him immediately.

"Beaker."

He struggles against his captors: "Doc! Hey, Doc!" But the old man pays no mind.

Mike makes an effort and manages to slip out of his guards' grip, incapacitating a few with some judo moves. Still moving he rushes towards Beaker, but the old man now sees Mike, his eyes widening in surprise.

"It's me, Doc!"

Beaker points with a trembling hand and suddenly screeches incoherently. A figure moves close, striking Mike with the butt end of a spear. Mike rolls with the punch and prepares to fight back, but sees that his attacker is . . . "Bill!"

The surprise allows the guards to regain a tight hold on Mike. "What the hell's going on, Doc?" he pleads. "Bill. Talk to me."

"It's no use, Mike," says a new voice, and Mike looks to see Popkiss, Jimmy, Felicity and

Jan, also under guard, pushed forward to stand near Mike at the stone bowl.

"Professor---"

"They don't recognize us, Mike," Popkiss declares. "Neither Beaker or Bill. It's almost as if they are deranged. Perhaps from the crash."

The Supercar group is forced to their knees and are held still as Beaker slowly crawls to the edge of the bowl and leans close, carefully examining each person.

Felicity is shaking her head. "This has nothing to do with the crash," she says.

"Then what's wrong?" Jan asks. "Why don't they recognize us?"

"Look at their eyes," Felicity says. "Horatio's. Mister Gibson's. The natives. I've seen that look before. You know I financed a clinic in Kuala Lumpur. I've seen that look on drug victims."

"Drugs?" Jimmy asks, incredulous. "But where'd they get---"

A light dawns in Jan's eyes. "The spores."

"Spores?" asks Mike.

Felicity nods tiredly. "I should've realized it. The fungi on this island is constantly releasing spores into the air in large amounts. These spores possibly possess some form of hallucinogenic quality, affecting their minds."

"But we're not affected," Mike says.

"We'll soon be," Felicity replies. "I've been feeling out of pink ever since we left the ship. I thought perhaps I wasn't as sprightly as I used to be. But things have begun to slightly spin in my vision---"

"Ach!" declares Popkiss, "and I thought I was simply out of shape."

"If we remain here for very long we'll soon be as affected as the others."

"If we remain alive," Jan says, eyeing the spears. "I hate to interrupt the Lost World lecture, but does anyone have an idea as to what's going to happen to us?"

Beaker is now pressing Mike's face between his hands, staring close. His mouth opens, and a thin line of drool appears.

"C'mon, Doc," Mike pleads. "Snap out of it."

"Pppppp . . ." Beaker begins.

"C'mon Doc!"

Beaker grimaces painfully. "Pilot . . ."

"Yeah, Doc."

"Pilot no longer registers," Beaker screeches, moving back from Mike. He is holding his head now, looking like he's hearing a sound too loud for him to bear. "Pilot no longer registers."

Mike is suddenly dragged away from the others, pulled into a circle of spear-wielding natives. From among their midst Bill Gibson moves close, slowly raising his spear as hands tear at Mike's shirt, opening it and revealing his chest.

"Beaker," Popkiss yells, "you must stop this."

"Bill," cries Jimmy, trying to twist free.

Surprisingly enough it's Jan who manages to slip loose. She pushes against her guard, knocking him over and causing him to drop his spear. Jan scoops it up and immediately begins swinging it about, trying to gain some room, but she can see that she's not going to be able to save Mike, who is busily struggling against his own guards as Bill readies himself to thrust the

spear.

Suddenly, though, laser beams lance across the clearing and up the rock wall, dislodging boulders. Dodson's Snark swoops low, still firing and managing to slice several of the huts apart.

In the ensuing panic everyone moves, managing to break free from their captors. Mike grabs a spear and uses it to knock Bill Gibson aside before rushing off into the forest.

At the stone bowl Beaker is standing and pointing at the attacking craft. "Supercar no longer registers," he intones.

Now in the treeline, Mike quickly shrugs off his backpack and opens it. He is soon joined by the others.

"Game plan, Mike?" Jimmy asks.

"First," Mike says, rummaging through the first aid kit and removing the oxygen mask with attached cylinder. He holds it to his face, taking a deep breath. "There. My head's clearing. We'll all need to take some."

"He'll be making another run," Jimmy says, staring up into the sky, "and Bill and the Doc are still out there."

But Mike is staring at the oxygen mask. "That's it!" he says. "Jimmy, give me the aid kit from your pack. Quick!"

Jimmy obeys as Mike slips the oxygen mask on. "Try and stay inside the trees," he orders. "If you can, get hold of Bill and keep him quiet. Share the oxygen mask in the Professor's pack."

"Wh-what are you going to do?" Felicity asks, gasping.

"Something probably crazy," Mike replies, grabbing the other first aid kit and making a run for the stone bowl. The clearing is now deserted and Mike has no trouble leaping into the bowl and grabbing Beaker, pulling him off the bowl and down into the shelter of the rock outcropping just as the attacker makes another strafing run on the village.

In the vehicle Masters is admonishing Dodson. "Do not risk killing Beaker or Popkiss or Gibson," he commands. "They are important. Do what you wish with the others."

Dodson nods and slowly begins maneuvering his craft for another run.

At the rock outcropping, Mike has opened the first aid kit and is roughly pulling the oxygen mask onto Beaker's face. "C'mon, Doc," he says. "Take a good deep hit and let's hope this condition of yours requires constant exposure to the spores."

Beaker is struggling, his eyes wild and insane as he glares at Mike.

The Snark makes another strafing run, blasting the top of the outcropping. Fragments fall upon Mike and Beaker, knocking them apart.

The scene is being watched from the others at the treeline. "They'll be killed out there," Jan says, pressing the oxygen mask to Bill Gibson's face.

"Jimmy," Popkiss breathes tiredly, "the remote control for our ship. Use it."

Jimmy nods excitedly, reaching for the controls on his belt.

At the northern shore the cargo SC-2K comes to life and slowly begins rising into the air.

In the Snark, Dodson is concentrating on making a swooping run on the village. In his target display he focuses a cross-hair sight on Mike . . . now separated from Beaker. His finger begins pressing on the trigger . . .

And suddenly the cargo SC-2K drifts into his flight path. Dodson reacts quickly, swoop-
ing aside and nearly avoiding an airborne collision.

Back on the ground Jimmy softly swears. "It worked, but he'll be watching for it next
time. I can't keep setting up interference runs."

Down on the ground Mike has watched the maneuver. "Good boy, Jim," he whispers.

"Now who's a fool?" someone softly murmurs nearby. Mike whirls around to see Beaker
sitting up, tiredly rubbing his head.

"Doc?"

Beaker gazes steadily at Mike. "It's no longer a dream, is it?" he says wonderingly. "It
really is you, isn't it? I'm unnngh ahhh-hhh awake, aren't I?"

Mike kneels next to Beaker. "The oxygen cancels out the spores," he says. "You're
thinking clearly."

"Ummm-nnnnn, I've always thought clearly, Mike," Beaker casually admits. "I'm ah-hhhh
simply back on the same unnnn-ahhh wavelength as everyone else, as it were."

He and Mike stagger to their feet, and Beaker shields his eyes to peer at the two variant
craft in the sky above them. "Some urrrr-ahhhh new modifications, it would seem. Most satis-
factory."

"Yeah, and most lethal. We gotta get out of here, Doc." Mike suddenly grabs Beaker,
pulling him back against the stone bowl as the attackers swoops close, firing off more lasers.

The attacker soars off. "I ah-hhhh take it, Mike, that the smaller craft is nnnnghhh some-
thing of a liability in our ah-hhhhh current situation."

"Getting more together by the moment, Doc," Mike replies, watching the skies. "C'mon.
The others are nearby."

"Ah-hhhh one moment, Mike. These are coherent light weapons which the craft is using,
correct?"

"Lasers, yeah, Doc. But---"

"And urrrrrrrrr you have an-nnnnnnnnn standard communicator, correct?"

"Yeah---"

"Then I suggest we attempt unique er-rrrr nnngh form of strategy."

At the treeline everyone is watching. "What the heck are they doing?" Jan asks.

Mike is climbing into the stone bowl, and Beaker is on the ground, holding the commu-
nicator and fiddling with the controls. "If I am ummmmm correct, there should be an errrr het-
erodyning effect locally established when the lasers nnnngh charge themselves prior to ah-
hhhh firing," Beaker says.

Mike is watching the Snark start to turn in his direction. "Doc . . . don't take this the wrong
way . . . but are you sure your head's screwed on tight?"

"Quite certain," Beaker replies, still making adjustments.

In the sky the Snark is beginning its run. Dodson is once again focusing on Mike with
the target cross-hairs.

"Mercury has separated himself from Beaker," he reports. "I have him clearly in my
sights."

"Eliminate him," Masters orders.

On the ground a weird howling noise is coming from the communicator in Beaker's hand.

"The lasers are er-rrrrrr charging, yes," Beaker says. "Prepare to jump, Mike."

"Yeah," replies Mike, readying himself, "and then he'll just fire into this empty bowl."

"Ah-hhhhh, not quite. Oh, and jump now!"

Mike leaps from the bowl . . .

The Snark fires its lasers . . .

The beams strike the bowl and bounce back, immediately striking the Snark. The variant is viciously sliced open, forcing Dodson to pull the ejection switch and blow himself free from the craft.

On the ground Beaker nods at the communicator. "Quite!"

Nearby Mike is carefully rising from the prone position he ended up in. "Wh-what . . ."

"As I had er-rrrrrr planned," Beaker replies, coming over and helping Mike up, "the lasers did not errr-nnnghhh fire into an empty bowl as you said but, rather, into a hmm-mmmm highly polished and concave surface, reflecting the beams back to their ah-hhhh source."

"I'm just glad it worked."

The others are joining them and Beaker moves to Jan, taking her hands. "My dear Cousin Felicity," he breathes, "you've become a vision!"

"The vision is over here, Horatio," says Felicity, moving up.

"Oh, ah-hhhh quite."

"And speaking of moving," Mike says, "we'd better do some ourselves before the natives return."

"Working on it," Jimmy replies, using his controls and bringing down the cargo ship. "But where's Supercar?"

"In a lagoon at the other end of the forest," Mike says, helping Popkiss and Jan move a still groggy Bill Gibson into the ship. "Out of fuel and with the engines shot up."

"The first problem can be solved with some of the fuel we're carrying on our ship," Popkiss says. "But the second . . ."

But Beaker is looking thoughtful. "Ah-hhhh Mike . . . you may have seen the er-rrrr remains of the second prototype nearby."

"All torn up and disassembled," Jimmy says.

"Disassembled true," replies Beaker, "but not ehh-unnnngh 'torn up' to use your phrase. The prototype was disassembled to er-rrrr create some form of ah-hhh ritual sacrifice as it were for our mmmnnngh companions. Everything was laid out in ah-errr order."

"Laid out?"

"Ah-hhh yes. Including, as it er-rrrr were, the two self-contained engine modules."

* * * * *

Darkness is falling as the rebuilt Supercar and the cargo ship are leaving Kyoryo Island.

"I'm afraid I ah-hhhh muddled everything up," Beaker is explaining, sitting alongside Mike in the cockpit. "After Leap Frog it was my intention to errnggggh go into exile as it were and errrr reason out what had happened. I arranged with Bill to mmmmm make it appear as if the second prototype had been destroyed by accident. I simply wanted to be alone, and Bill would've returned once I had a base nnnnngh-aaa established on the island. Dear, dear . . . I

never considered the effects of the-ahhhh spores on both myself and Bill.”

“Bill will be all right,” Jimmy is saying. “He’s sitting up and looking better.”

“Then he’ll be the only one who’s-aaahhhhh all right,” Beaker replies, shaking his head. “Oh dear, oh dear, I’ve made a mess of it all. Masterspy in charge of Black Rock. Oh dear, dear, dear.”

“Look Doc, as long as you and Bill are okay we’re doing fine,” Mike assures him. “All we really need to worry about now is recovering Mitch.”

“Umm-ahhhh, quite.”

A short pause, and then Jimmy speaks from the cargo ship. “If that’s what’s worrying you, Mike, then I should tell you that we might’ve already arranged something.”

“Yah,” agrees Popkiss. “Or, rather, Bertie has arranged it.”

Mike looks surprised. “The Rhinemaiden?”

* * * * *

At the Phoenix, Arizona Cryogenics labs, the tech taps his partner on the shoulder. “We’re in luck,” he says. “We just had some tech support come down from Nevada.”

“Great. Any results?”

“The pods will re-sort themselves back into their original configuration and reboot with the housekeeping computer. It was sort of like Christmas tree lights. One goes bad and the whole string goes wonky.”

“So what happened?”

“The tech support found the bad pod. Almost immediately. Pulled it and took it back to Nevada. And wait’ll you hear which pod it was . . .”

A close up of a pod carrying a display reading 6060842. It is in a cradle in the hold of a delivery truck heading down the highway.

At the wheel: Berta Karsendorf.

* * * * *

Masters and Zarin are at the main screen in Masters office.

Masters is not pleased. “What . . . do . . . you . . . mean?”

At Kyoryo Island the support ships are hovering low over the village. Several of Masters men are wandering about, rifles at the ready. One of them is speaking into a communicator. “There is no sign of Beaker, Popkiss, Gibson, Mercury or any of the others. Both Supercar and the cargo ship are also gone.”

“They have to be there on that island.”

“Pursuit Snark still does not respond, and some of my men are beginning to act sort of peculiar. Wait a minute. We’re being attacked by someone . . . it’s Dodson. He’s gone crazy!”

“They have to be on that island,” Masters repeats, his voice rising. “They can’t be anywhere else.”

“Try outside your window,” another voice suggests from a speaker on the console.

Masters looks as if he’s been stabbed in the gut, and he turns his chair towards the large picture window. Stabbing a button he causes the curtain to open and show . . .

Supercar. Hovering outside. In the front of the cockpit are Mike and Beaker. Behind them sits Berta Karsendorf, with the pod containing Mitch next to her.

Masters moves to the window. "Mercury," he hisses.

Mike raises his microphone. "Just wanted to thank you for your hospitality," he says with a wicked smile. "And also for taking good care of Mitch all these years."

Masters is gripping the arms of his chair, glaring with raw hostility at Mike. "I have Supercar, Mercury," he declares hotly. "My property. My property."

Mike calmly returns Masters' look. There's no one but the two of them.

"You want Supercar?" he softly asks.

Masters continues to fix Mike in the gunsights of his eyes.

"Then come and take it," Mike continues. He shoves at the throttle, and Supercar tilts radically upwards, rising rapidly into the air on its engines.

Masters and Zarin rush to the window . . . just in time to see Supercar roar overhead and race off into the sky. They remain where they are, watching.

"It is happening again, Master," Zarin says. "Mercury is doing it to us again."

Masters continues to watch the empty sky.

"Same opponent," he growls low. "But a different game."

* * * * *

Supercar soars through the night sky. "Pilot to Professor," Mike says into the communicator. "We've got Mitch and Doctor Karsendorf safely on board. We'll rendezvous with you at Hawaii."

"I'm flying now, Mike," Bill Gibson reports from the cockpit of the cargo ship. "Sort of getting my legs back. Jimmy and the Professor are taking inventory of the components we salvaged from the second prototype."

"Good deal," Mike nods. "Now all we need is a plan."

"May I comment?" asks Jan.

"Please do."

"Well . . . we're currently on the run with equipment and property technically belonging to someone else. We're technically guilty of theft, industrial sabotage, assault---"

"I thought you were fighting Masters' claims in court," Mike says.

"I am," Jan replies, "which is why I was going to add that, on an immediate basis, all of you might require a trained legal mind."

"You volunteering yourself?"

"I am."

"I plan on helping too, Mike dear," Felicity's voice adds.

"Oh satisfactory!" says Beaker, beaming.

"With all this help," Mike considers, "how can we possibly lose?"

"Precisely, Pilot."

Supercar continues traveling through the sky, the silence finally broken by a small voice.

"Herr Mercury?"

"Huh? Doctor Karsendorf?"

More silence. Then: "Just lettink you know that I can talk."

"Oh! That's good."

End