

SPACE QUEST #2

HIDDEN PLANET

Chapter 1

by James Gelsey

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“Leep, that’s like the millionth time we’ve orbited the planet!” Cadet Zale Gyre said. “I wish you’d let me land this thing already.”

Sivah and Bey, the other Endio Academy cadets on board the Quest, jumped at the sound of Zale’s sudden outburst. Leep, a prototype L-P Series robot, moved forward on her large, rolling-tread feet.

“The pod’s computer is still scanning the surface for a flat area large enough to land on,” Leep reported. “I think we should follow the computer’s guidance on these matters.”

“Following the computer’s guidance is what got us accidentally launched from the Vahok and pulled through that stellar vortex in the first place!” Zale exclaimed.

“Actually, Cadet Zale, it was a quantum pulse that got us accidentally launched from the Vahok,” Leep said.

Only two days ago, the cadets left on the Endio Academy’s annual Fourth Year expedition. But their school spaceship’s chance encounter with a stellar vortex changed everything. Getting pulled through the stellar vortex left the cadets thousands of star units

away from their friends, their teachers and their homes on Endio.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind being lost so much if we weren’t in the middle of nowhere,” Sivah said.

“Technically, we’re not nowhere, Sivah. We’re just in an uncharted sector of space,” Bey said. “By the way, I fixed your telepatch.” He handed Sivah a flexible mesh disc about the size of a coin. “Fixing mine and Zale’s were easy, but your Gigapatch is a lot more complicated.”

Sivah's eyes widened in amazement.

"How'd you do that?" she asked as she placed the telepatch behind her left ear.

"I found some tools on the engineering deck," Bey replied. "Did you know there's a fully equipped mini-lab down there?"

Zale rolled his eyes and said, "All pods have them. Or didn't they teach you that sort of thing on the Solar Moon?"

Don't let him bother you, Sivah 'patched Bey. He looked over at Sivah and smiled slightly.

"How about it, Leep?" asked Zale. "Any luck yet?"

"I'll check again, Cadet Zale," Leep answered. She rolled over to the main command console along the front wall. She raised her robotic hand to plug it into a communication port on the panel.

"NO!" Sivah and Bey shouted. Leep stopped and looked up at them with a puzzled expression on her computer monitor.

"Remember how your hand got stuck last time?" Sivah asked. "Twice?"

"Sivah's right, Leep, let me check the computer," Bey said. He typed some commands into a keyboard on the control panel. A moment later, a small screen flipped

up and images of the planet's surface began flashing on it.

"What are you doing?" Zale asked.

"I told the computer to generate terrain maps of the planet's surface," Bey explained as he studied the screen. "I want to do a manual search in case the computer misses something."

"The computer's not going to miss anything," Zale said. "Besides, it's so dark down there only the computer's special scanners can see what's on the surface. You're wasting your time, Bey. You'll never find anything."

"Except maybe a place to land," Bey announced. "Right there." He pointed to a dot on the screen. "Quadrant eleven, vector intersect seven point four."

"You really found someplace to land?" Sivah asked, sounding impressed.

Bey nodded. "It'll be tight, but we can do it. How about it, Leep?"

Leep processed the request for a moment, then gave her permission. Bey entered a sequence of numbers into the keyboard. Almost immediately, the cadets felt a change in momentum and scurried back to their seats. They watched the planet's enormous ridges

and angular plateaus slowly rise up and engulf their tiny space ship. The closer they got to the surface, the darker it became outside.

“What was that?” Sivah asked.

“What?” Zale said.

“I think something just flew by the pod,” Sivah answered.

“I didn’t see anything,” Zale said.

The pod vibrated as the landing boosters automatically fired. The craft slowed for its landing. A moment later, the Quest touched down with a gentle thump.

“That was it?” Zale asked, somewhat disappointed. “That was the landing?”

“Believe me,” began Sivah. “After getting launched from our school spaceship, stuck in a planetoid field, and sucked through a stellar vortex, I think we deserve a soft landing like this.”

But before Zale could respond, the cadets felt the pod tip forward. The tiny space ship teetered back and forth before finally disappearing into an enormous crater.

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