

SPACE QUEST

BLAST-OFF!

Chapter 2

by James Gelsey

Copyright ©2004 by James Gelsey.
All rights reserved.

Chapter 2

“Come on already!”

Zale fidgeted in front of the boarding portal.

Tonnor pushed his way through the throng of cadets and stood between Zale and Reg.

“My dad told me we’re flying one of the original Ban’ok explorer ships,” he said.

One of those clunkers? Zale ’patched back. I can’t believe it. I flew one of those in my simulator and it was like trying to pilot a trash compactor.

“I heard they put in a new propulsion system that delivers twenty-one megatons of

thrust in only eight seconds,” Reg eagerly added.

“Yeah, well, whatever,” Zale yawned.

“Shhh. Here she comes.”

Dr. W walked over to the massive portal and punched numbers on a key pad. After a loud hissssssssss, the door began scrolling up into the ceiling. Zale grabbed his backpack and threw it over his shoulder.

“Last one in is a soiled strugel!”

The three friends darted under the door as it continued to open.

“WOAHHHHHHH!”

They stopped dead in their tracks. A six-foot tall robotic monstrosity with traction wheels and long metallic arms rolled towards them. A small rectangular instrument panel hung over the center of the robot’s frame. But the robot’s head was most unusual of all. Instead of recognizable features, like most robots on Endio, its face was a black monitor with the two white eyes on it.

Creepy! Tonnor patched his friends.

They jumped out of the way and watched the machine maneuver itself into the docking station. The rest of the cadets gasped and stepped back. Except for Bey, that is.

“Ah, Leep, I forgot all about you,” Dr. W said.

“That’s all right, Dr. W,” the robot responded in a warm, friendly voice.

“Cadets, this is Leep,” Dr. W said, introducing the robot. “Leep is a prototype L-P series android who will be joining us on the expedition. She will be assisting me in many of my duties, so I expect you to treat her as you would any other member of the Academy faculty. Leep, is everything ready on board?”

“Absolutely, Dr. W,” replied Leep.

“Then let’s get going,” Dr. W said.

“Cadets, please follow Leep onto the Vahok.”

The name of the space ship caught Sivah’s attention. She grabbed her bag and walked over to Dr. W. Melly followed close behind.

“Excuse me, Dr. W,” Sivah said. “Did you say this ship is called the Vahok?”

“Yes, Sivah,” she answered, noticing the subtle shift in Sivah’s mood. “And it’s been retro-fitted, so there won’t be any of the original Ban’ok equipment on board.”

“Or original Ban’ok memories?” Sivah added.

Dr. W smiled gently at Sivah. “It’ll be fine, Sivah.”

Sivah and Melly joined the rest of the cadets.

“What was that about?” Melly asked.

“My parents were on the first Ban’ok expedition that flew this ship,” Sivah answered. “The name of the ship was changed to commemorate their home planet after it was destroyed.”

“Really? What was the name of their planet?” Melly wanted to know.

Sivah looked at her without blinking.

“Vahok,” she replied dryly.

“Oh, yeah,” Melly said, a little embarrassed.

Zale was the first cadet on the space ship. He was very surprised at what he saw. The seating area was cramped and dark. Zale could make out a single row of seats along each side of the cabin. There were no windows, and only a single row of yellow lights along the ceiling provided barely enough light.

“Zale, over there,” Reg called, pointing to the seats in the front. Zale made his way down the narrow aisle and slid into his seat.

The cabin quickly filled with the excited chatter of the other cadets. Bey, the last cadet on board, had to stoop to keep from bumping

his head on the low ceiling. He sat down just as Leep closed the hatch.

“Cadets, we are about to depart from Endio, so please fasten your harnesses,” Dr. W instructed. She strapped Leep to the wall at the front of the cabin and sat down across from the robot.

The cadets sat in complete silence, waiting for something to happen. The anticipation was almost too much to bear. Then a sudden tremor shook the cabin.

“That was the ship’s levitational system taking over,” Dr. W reported. “We’re pulling away from the space port.”

Zale closed his eyes and could feel the rumble of the engines. He pretended he was in his flight simulator. He reached out and flipped some imaginary switches. Then he grabbed the accelerator and prepared to blast off.

Sivah looked across the aisle at Melly, but the force of twenty-one megatons of thrust threw her head back against the seat. Then, as the Vahok soared into the space, the sides of the flight cabin became transparent. Sivah and the rest of the cadets now had an unobstructed view of the universe around them.

“Blastin!” Zale marvelled.

“Welcome to outer space,” Dr. W said as she stood up. “That glowing planet over there is Endio. And the smaller one just behind it is the Solar Moon. Right now, the Solar Moon is in total darkness for three months. That’s when it orbits closest to Endio.”

“It better be careful, or it might knock into Endio and get a nasty bump on the side of its head,” Zale joked. Reg, Tonnor and some of the other cadets giggled. Bey shrank down into his seat.

“That kind of attitude is not befitting cadets of the Endio Academy,” Dr. W warned.

“There are ten planetary observation modules on this ship, and I won’t think twice about programming one to return to Endio.

Remember, cadets, our differences only serve to strengthen us.”

“We are all Endions now,” came the cadets’ automatic reponse.

“Thank you,” said Dr. W. “Now let’s get down to business. Each of you has been assigned to an expedition team of three cadets. Each team will be assigned to one of the planetary observation modules, or pods. Throughout the expedition, your teams will complete a series of tasks, some on the Vahok

and some on your pod. The success of your teams will determine not only your individual grades for the expedition, but will also factor greatly in the rest of your Academy education.”

A wave of murmurs rose up from the cadets.

“I know you think it’s not fair to be graded on the work of others,” Dr. W said.

“But it is the Endion way, cadets. It is exactly how different civilizations joined together years ago to create our home on Endio. This expedition will help prepare you to lead Endio into the future. You may begin, Leep. Leep?”

Leep struggled to unfasten the safety harness. “Not to worry, Dr. W. I’ll be—out—in just a—minute—”

It took all of Zale’s self-control not to laugh out loud at Leep’s predicament.

What a mohedd! he patched to Reg and Tonnor.

Dr. W released the harness, and Leep began rolling down the center aisle. Each cadet received a small purple card. The card had a silver constellation of stars on one side and an orange circle on the other.

“These are your cadet badges,” Leep explained. “Keep them with you at all times.

Housing is by constellation, so check your badges for your assigned rooms.”

As the cadets eagerly studied their cards, Dr. W continued.

“Your badges have been programmed to reveal your team assignments in exactly eighteen minutes. Lights-out will be in exactly twenty-three minutes. I suggest you get a good night’s sleep, cadets. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

Don’t miss Chapter 3 of
SPACE QUEST: BLAST-OFF!
Coming next month only to James’s Bookshelf at
WWW.GELSEYBOOKS.COM!