

SPACE QUEST

BLAST-OFF!

Chapter 5

by James Gelsey

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Chapter 5

Team Quest! Can you hear me?

Dr. W frantically telepatched the cadets.

Zale! Sivah! Bey! Are you all right?

Sivah answered first.

We're fine, Dr. W, just a little—

What happened? Zale interrupted. One minute we're getting ready to do inventory, and the next thing we know we're out in space!

Take it easy, Zale, everything's all right, Dr. W said. Switching to standard communications. Dr. W's voice disappeared from the telepatches and came through the pod's main radio.

"The Vahok was hit by a quantum pulse."

"A what?" asked Sivah.

“A quantum pulse,” Leep said, “is an electromagnetic shockwave of unknown origin. It disturbs the operation of virtually every kind of device imaginable.”

“The pulse knocked out some of the Vahok’s monitoring systems. It must have activated the pod’s computers and initiated the launch sequence,” Dr. W said. “But don’t worry. We’re adjusting our course to stay with you and will get you back on board in no time.”

“I can pilot the Quest back to the Vahok,” Zale volunteered.

“No thank you, Zale, that won’t be necessary,” Dr. W answered. “Leep, please adjust the navigational programming.”

“Right away, Dr. W!” Leep responded. She rolled over to the command console and discovered that her robotic hand had broken off. It was stuck in the communication link.

“Cadets, everything will be fine,” Dr. W reassured them. “Please follow Leep’s instructions, and try to take advantage of this unexpected opportunity. I’ll be back in touch soon.”

“I don’t care what Dr. W says, I’ll be much happier when we’re back on the Vahok,” Sivah said.

“Not me,” Zale countered. “I couldn’t be happier than I am right now. Just look at that view. It’s absolutely incredible. Wait’ll I tell Reg and Tonnor about this. I mean I really feel like I’m out in space with the stars and the planetoids and the...”

Zale's eyes widened in horror as an enormous rock tumbled through space directly at them.

“PLANETOID!”

He and Sivah threw themselves to the ground and braced for impact. A few seconds passed but nothing happened. Zale and Sivah popped their heads up and peered over the edge of the console.

“The planetoid's moving away from us,” Sivah gasped in amazement. “I was sure it was going to hit us head on.”

“It did,” Bey stated, still focusing his gaze out into space.

“What, did it bounce off us like a mungo ball?” teased Zale.

“I don't know what a mungo ball is, but yes, it bounced off of us,” Bey nodded. “The Quest must have an automatic energy shield.”

“Hold on, guys,” Sivah interrupted. “Doesn't that ship look like the Vahok?” She pointed to a long explorer-class space ship drifting off their right.

“Why is it over there?” Zale asked. “Leep, we're supposed to be getting closer to it, not farther away.”

“I'm having difficulty reconnecting my hand,” Leep answered. “I can get a partial connection, enabling the computer to talk to me, but I can't communicate with it. It seems there's a pre-set navigational directive. I checked the coordinates

against my data files, and it appears we're going to the Grafl Colony."

Sivah knew the name sounded familiar, and then remembered why.

"But the Grafl Colony is on the other side of Alron!" she exclaimed. "It was the first outpost that the Ban'oks established when they arrived in the Alronian system."

"I'm from Alron, and I never heard of the Grafl Colony," Zale challenged.

"That's because it was abandoned once the Ban'oks were allowed onto Alron," Sivah explained. "It happened way before we were even born."

"Why would the pod want to go to the Grafl Colony?" Bey wondered.

"It doesn't matter," Zale interjected. "What matters is getting us back to the Vahok." He pointed to the view screen again and saw another planetoid coming at them. This time, no one had a chance to duck. The cadets watched the giant chunk of space rock slam into the pod and bounce back off into space.

"Narlin!" Zale said as yet another planetoid sailed at them. Soon, the space around them was full of planetoids of all sizes and shapes. "We must be in a planetoid field!"

"Leep, can the energy shields handle all this?" Sivah asked with a trace of worry in her voice.

"Absolutely, Sivah," Leep replied. "We can make it through to the other side of the planetoid field without a problem."

“Oh yeah? I’d consider moving away from the Vahok a pretty big problem,” Sivah added.

Bey, who had been deep in concentration, walked over to Leep.

“Leep, is there anything we can do to keep from getting to the other side of the planetoid field?” he asked urgently.

“Short of shutting down all of the pod’s automatic systems and getting crushed by a planetoid?” Leep asked. “No.”

“Why?” Sivah asked. “What’s so dangerous about the planetoids?”

“By themselves, planetoids are nothing to worry about,” he explained. “But when they appear

after a quantum pulse like the one that hit the Vahok, it can only mean one thing: a stellar vortex.”

Zale shook his head in disbelief.

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” Zale said to Sivah. “The Academy would never bring cadets into a sector of space where there’s anything dangerous like a stellar vortex.”

“I’m not saying they did it on purpose,” Bey said. “Maybe it just appeared. They’ve been known to do that. And if we get even within one-eighth of a star unit from the vortex, we’ll be pulled in. We have to turn around.”

Zale considered what Bey had said. Part of him didn’t want to admit that a kid from the Solar Moon could possibly know more about space than he did.

But part of him also didn't want to be sucked into a stellar vortex.

"Now that's the first thing he's said that makes sense," Zale admitted. "Leep, there's no way the Vahok's going to come through a planetoid field to get us. If we're going to make it back, we have to control the pod ourselves."

"But you never even started inventory control," Leep protested. "How can you be expected to fly a pod?"

"I've flown one of these things a thousand times in my simulator back home," Zale said. "You shut down the automatic systems and then re-engage the energy shields. All I have to do is execute a half turn. Nothing to it."

"I'm not programmed to make these kinds of decisions," Leep said anxiously. "I'd better contact Dr. W."

"But there's a stellar vortex out there!" Zale shouted.

"Don't listen to him, Leep," Sivah pleaded. "He'll say anything just so he can fly the pod!"

"That's not true!" Zale yelled.

"Leep, you're in charge, not Zale," Sivah reminded her. "Do something!"

Leep regarded the stand-off between the two cadets and froze.

"Fatal processing error," was all she said before she "whooped" and telescoped herself down into the shape of a small cylinder.

“Great, now look what you’ve done!” Sivah
accused. “I’m calling Dr. W.”

“Better hurry,” Bey said. “We don’t have much
time.”

“For what?” asked Sivah.

“For anything,” Bey responded. “Look.”

“The planetoids are gone,” Zale said. Then he
noticed a bright patch of light not too far away. Upon
closer examination, the cadets could make out a swirl
of stars moving around in a circular motion.

“Hey, what’s that?” Zale asked.

“The stellar vortex,” Bey said plainly.

Sivah eyes widened in horror. “And we’re
heading straight for it!”

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