

# SPACE QUEST

## *BLAST-OFF!*

### Chapter 6

by James Gelsey

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The cadets watched the twinkling stars lazily march around the outer rim of the stellar vortex. But as the stars got closer to the center, they spiraled in faster and faster before disappearing in flashes of light.

“Come in, Dr. W!” Sivah called. “Are you there?”

“I hear you, Sivah,” Dr. W answered through her telepatch. “Can you all hear me? Is everything all right?”

“Yes, Dr. W,” Sivah replied. “Except that Leep can’t override the pod’s automatic systems and it’s taking us to the Grafl Colony

and there's a stellar vortex right in front of us!"

"Relax, Sivah," Dr. W said. "First, a rescue pod is entering the planetoid field right now and will follow your ion trail. It should be there soon. Second, stellar vortexes are very rare. What you see is probably nothing more than a star in its initial stages of collapsing upon itself."

Bey listened carefully to Dr. W's explanation and shook his head.

"It's a stellar vortex, Dr. W," he interrupted.

"Bey, is that you?" she asked. "Where's Leep?"

The three cadets looked at each other uneasily and shrugged.

"She's, uh, sort of, resting now," Sivah answered.

"Not again," Dr. W moaned. "Bey, go over to Leep and push the black button on the side of the cylinder."

Bey followed instructions. As soon as he pressed the button, the cylinder burst open and Leep unfolded herself.

"Leep, this is no time for a nap," called Dr. W. "Please assess the pod's location."

Leep turned her monitor towards the front of the pod. She quickly scanned the entire visible area.

“My sensors detect a powerful source of electro-magnetic energy, coupled with surges in gravitational distortion ranging from minus twenty to positive three hundred point seven,” Leep reported.

“Three hundred point seven,” Dr. W echoed. “That’s impossible.”

“I could conduct another scan if you—”

“Leep, shut down the automatic systems immediately and get the pod out of there!” ordered Dr. W.

“I may have some difficulty executing your request, Dr. W,” Leep replied as she stared at the comm link. “Right now I’m a little short-handed.”

“What?” asked Dr. W.

“Her hand broke off in the comm link,” Zale said. “She can’t talk to the computer or even handle the controls. But I can! I’ve done it in my simulator.”

The cadets waited breathlessly while Dr. W considered her options.

“Very well, Cadet Zale,” Dr. W said. “I hereby authorize you to pilot the pod out of danger *under my supervision.*”

“Yes!” Zale exclaimed, jumping into the captain’s chair.

“Sivah, Bey, I want you two sitting at the main command console,” Dr. W instructed.

“Sivah, keep your fingers on the orange switches. Those control the automatic systems. Bey, the two green buttons activate the energy shields. Zale, activate the captain’s command console.”

He punched two buttons on the arm of the captain’s chair, and a numbered yellow key pad popped up out of it.

“Zale, enter the following code to access the control panel,” Dr. W began.

“Two...seven...four...” Zale’s telepatch abruptly went quiet. A second later, the entire pod shook violently under the impact of an enormous crash.

Sivah and Bey were thrown from their chairs. Leep lurched forward and then rolled into the back wall again.

“Another quantum pulse,” Bey said, pulling himself up. “And the closer we get, the more that there’ll be.”

“Dr. W? Dr. W?” called Zale.

“You’ll never reach her now,” Bey said.

“Telepatches weren’t designed for this kind of intense electro-magnetic interference.”

Sivah stood motionless and watched planetoids whiz by and join the parade of space junk circling the heart of the vortex.

“We’re heading right into it!” she cried.

“Leep, do something!” Zale shouted.

“Right!” Leep replied. She rolled over to the command console and mightily yanked her robotic hand out of the comm link. With a quick twist, she reattached it to the end of her arm. “Now what?”

Before Zale could answer, another powerful pulse jolted the ship. In an instant, the lights flickered out and the entire pod lost

power. It became eerily quiet, as if sound itself could not escape the vortex’s powerful grasp.

As the pod neared the center of the vortex, the flashes of vaporized matter became more frequent. Soon the entire pod was bathed in a steady bright light whose heat grew in intensity.

Zale, Bey and Sivah strained to shut their eyes, but the light was so intense it illuminated the insides of their eyelids. The cadets felt the pressure against their bodies growing, as if something was literally squeezing the life out of them. The heat and light and near-suffocation became unbearable

for one terrifying instant. Sivah opened her mouth to scream and out came a singular, deafening clap of thunder.

Zale, Bey and Sivah opened their eyes. They filled their lungs with enormous gulps of air. The pressure on their bodies was gone. The bright light was gone. The heat was gone. And looking out into space, they noticed that even the stellar vortex was gone.

“Where’d it go?” asked Zale.

“I don’t know,” Sivah said. “But let’s contact Dr. W and get back to the Vahok already. Come in, Dr. W.”

There was no reply.

“Maybe the Vahok’s out of range,” Zale shrugged.

“I’ve got the new Gigapatch,” Sivah answered. “Range shouldn’t be a problem.”

“You’ve got the GigaMeg?” Zale asked in awe. “Man, I read about those last month. They’re supposed to be the best.”

Bey looked worriedly out into space, and then turned to Leep.

“Leep, can you do another one of those scans and try to locate the Vahok?” he asked.

Leep’s head scanned the area in front of them.

“So, what’s the range on one of those?”

Zale asked Sivah.

“I don’t know, something like ten star units,” she answered, exceedingly irritated.

“And we can’t be that far away from the Vahok. I’m going to try a different frequency.”

Sivah walked to the back of the bridge and tried again.

“Melly? Can you hear me?” she whispered.

“My scan has not detected any unusual electro-magnetic or gravitational distortions,” Leep reported. “Nor has it been able to detect

any ion trails.” “Who cares about ion trails?”

Zale asked. “Spaceships don’t leave ion trails.”

“Endion spaceships don’t leave ion trails,” Bey corrected him. “But old Ban’ok ships did.”

“So what does that prove?” Zale challenged.

“That they’re gone,” Sivah answered softly, slowly walking back up front. “They’ve left us out here all by ourselves.”

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