

First Contact

A prequel to *Spacer's Luck*

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Of all the stupid and reckless things Rand had ever done in his life, none came close to match the temerity of deserting the army by stealing a recon ship and fraternizing with an enemy combatant. So to speak: the alien was a mechanic, not a combatant, but it was definitively on the enemy's side by virtue of its non-human DNA.

Very non-human, Rand thought, glancing aside at his new copilot, a blue-skinned alien with eight tentacles for limbs and two large black eyes shaped like half-moons. The copilot seat was not made to seat a Quaan; it held its tentacles close to its main body in an attempt to leave Rand enough room to pilot the spacecraft.

“You alright?” he ventured.

It was well known that Quaans were telepaths, but, contrarily to what the government liked to claim, they couldn't invade a human mind from afar: Rand had recently learned that they couldn't even talk to a human if they couldn't touch them. In order to answer him, the alien had to stretch a tentacle to touch his cheek.

This one endures. No harm will occur.

“If you say so.” His short stay aboard the Quaan ship had taught him the air they breathed was much richer in oxygen: the concentration aboard this recon ship, set for human comfort, couldn't have been pleasant for the Quaan. “If you can hold for a day, we'll reach somewhere I can buy oxygen bottles.”

Understood. The tentacle did not retreat. *This one is named Kyuzo.*

“Rand.” The tentacle remained, soft against his skin. He glanced aside, annoyed. “What? Just spill it.”

Is captivity to be unpleasant?

Rand laughed until his ribcage hurt. “Captivity? Andromeda's tits, I'm not handing you in to the goddamned government! Why do you think I ripped out the tracker?” He motioned to the hole he'd made in the control panel. “We're both deserting.”

Why?

“Why what? You said your kind would kill you for letting me go. My government would do the same goddamned thing. I didn't want to be in their goddamned army to begin with.” He'd joined to avoid serving a few years in prison for theft, thinking that getting paid to be a soldier was better than wasting his time in a cell. That was before he realized the government was lying about

the war going 'well'. More than lying: if the numbers he'd heard whispered were correct, this mess was nothing short of mass suicide for the human side. No wonder they were enrolling criminals.

The Quaan—Kyuzo—removed its tentacle and was quiet for the next several hours, which suited Rand fine. He was running on adrenaline, having not slept in over twenty-four hours, and he needed to focus his attention on avoiding any other spaceship that might be in the area: out here, any spaceship they encountered would be military, and that would be disastrous for both of them. He didn't want to know what his side would do to Kyuzo if they got their hands on it. Dissection? Torture? Both? At least he would only earn a quick public execution.

Collapsed against the wall, Kyuzo seemed to sleep for a long time, long enough for Rand to begin to worry the Quaan had passed out. He did nothing: he couldn't help. A recon ship was built for speed and what little storage space there was contained nothing but rations, sanitary installations and a first-aid kit designed to handle problems specific to humans.

He pushed the engines as much as he dared, until his whole body ached with the pressure, and watched the distance separating them from the closest station grow ever shorter.

“Don't die on me, squid face.”

* * * *

Three hours earlier...

Rand couldn't sleep. Being captured by the enemy, especially when the enemy was a strange species rumored to have the power to invade a human mind, was not conducive to rest. There was also the fact the air wasn't right and made him feel dizzy and nauseous. He suspected it contained gases dangerous to a human body.

There was nothing but dark blue walls to watch: his cell had no window and the door had disappeared. Seats, or what he guessed to be seats, were placed against one wall: they visibly weren't meant for humans, looking like abstract sculptures more than anything else.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been there, but his growling stomach hinted it had been several hours. He wondered where Mart, his copilot, had been taken. He disliked the possibilities that came to mind but part of him wished they'd taken him first instead of letting him die slowly from this poisonous air. Alternatively, they could have allowed him to keep his helmet, which would have provided him with suitable air.

The growing buzzing sound didn't help. Rand was almost positive it came from outside his head but he couldn't find its source. The irritating sound added to his agony as he drifted across the room in complete weightlessness.

When the wall split open to produce a door, he tried to rush the enemy in the hope they might finish him on the spot and spare him further abuse. Unfortunately, he lacked the coordination to push himself off the wall in the right direction; he instead drifted across the room and bumped into the opposite wall.

There was a Quaan in the doorway. His six feet, or the six tentacles they used for locomotion and for keeping themselves affixed to the ground, were twisting and writhing. Somehow, Rand thought it looked nervous. It was illogical for a seemingly unarmed alien to come to him alone, but he felt too sick to try to work it out. He suspected there was no escape, even if he successfully took down the alien and went in search of his ship.

“Dromeda’s zits,” he slurred, feeling about to throw up. “Shoot me already.”

A tentacle tentatively curled about his wrist, ending his drifting, and another touched his exposed forehead. He tensed, expecting some terrible thing to be done to his mind. Instead, he only heard words, words without a voice, but not without emotions. They were anxious words.

The human must leave. Quick.

He made a questioning sound.

The ship unit is angry. Angry for Caladar. Does the human not hear?

Was that what the buzzing was? Wait, Caladar? Caladar the great victory, the government said. Those in the know told a different story: Caladar the great massacre, where surrender pleas had been ignored and the prisoners tortured to death. Yeah, that’d make anyone angry.

He didn’t ask about Matt. He could guess too well.

The tentacle retreated and something was jammed over his head. He recognized it as his missing helmet and reached up to turn it around—for the Quaan was holding it backward. He fiddled with his spacesuit, connecting—there. The oversized helmet whirred into action, providing proper human-breathable air.

It didn’t clear the nausea right away, though he breathed easier. He didn’t move, waiting to recover, hoping to recover. The Quaan was however in a hurry: tentacles curled about his limbs and he found himself dragged down the corridor like a balloon held by a child.

The corridors were round and of the same dark blue color as everything else. Combined with the soft bounciness of the walls and the invisibility of the doors, it made Rand wonder if they were inside a bioship, something more alive than not. He’d heard some species used such ships.

They met no one, perhaps because of luck, perhaps because the Quaan could somehow tell where its fellow aliens were. They arrived in a corridor from which smaller corridors branched out. He was shoved in one and he saw metal at the end: his ship. This was a boarding ramp of sorts.

He removed his helmet and seized the nearest tentacle. His move made the Quaan shudder in what seemed to be fear, but it relaxed when he merely touched the limb to his cheek. He had a suspicion communication could not occur without touch: no Quaan had spoken to him before this one. “Why are you doing this?”

The ship unit is angry. Judgment is clouded. Unacceptable actions are being taken. The ship unit will be disciplined by the mother unit.

Rand took the time to interpret the strange speech. Since Quaans were telepaths, the ‘ship unit’ must refer to the general mood. Unless it meant the ship itself was alive and angry. Either way, this anger was pushing them to torture or murder, which may be illegal since they would be disciplined for it.

“If the others are so angry, why aren’t you?”

This one cares for the ship. This one does not fight.

A mechanic? Or a veterinarian?

The human must go. The Quaan pushed him with two tentacles. They were twitching and writhing again, certainly a sign of stress.

He resisted, a hand on the wall and a frown on his face. “Hang on. If they’re angry enough to hurt Matt, what are they going to do to you for letting me go?”

There was no answer, which was answer enough. Military justice was never kind.

Rand was beginning to feel sick again. Goddamned alien air. “Better come with me if you’d like to live,” he said, slamming his helmet back on and kicking the floor to float toward the ship. Opening the door, he slid inside to the pilot seat. From there, he growled at the alien. “Move it!”

He wasn’t sure why the Quaan decided to trust him. He wasn’t sure the Quaan knew either.

* * * *

Rand drank his fifth beer slowly, telling himself it was the last one. He needed a clear head to conduct business and, unlike most people in the bar tonight, he was indeed here for business. He’d already managed to trade the stolen army ship for a less suspicious one, an old but spacious Eagle 34 model. Kyuzo claimed to understand the Eagle’s propulsion system and how to care for it so they’d rigged the machinery room so that the air in it was suited for a Quaan. Now, Rand needed to find a trustworthy pilot. His piloting skills were acceptable but a crew of two couldn’t handle a ship of that size. With a mechanic and a pilot in his employ, he would be ready to think of ways to earn money.

He knew why it had been easy to trade the army ship: it had the right size and power to be used in a starship race. Exactly like starships, it was little more than a cockpit with huge engines attached to it. Since there was a championship scheduled for the next day, it was likely to appear in it.

The bar he was in was currently filled to capacity with excited fans and groupies. A rise in screaming told him another competitor in tomorrow's race had entered the bar. It must be nice to be young and stupid and have nothing better to do than scream admiration at your racing idol...

A tall, lithe man squeezed beside him at the bar and shouted cheerfully over the noise. "Rand Lavern?"

He almost corrected the man, barely remembering Lavern was his brand new name. An army deserter couldn't go around using his old name. "Yeah?"

"I saw the notice on your Eagle. Still need a pilot?"

Rand shifted to have a good look at the speaker: his slanted eyes, hairless face and deep black hair identified him as a man of Asian descent while his tight race suit, marked with the number 69 and the name Lighting in bright yellow, proclaimed him a starship racer. Not just any racer, at that.

"Vince Lighting, isn't it?" Rand said in surprise. "Why would a racer need a new job?"

The man's sunny smile didn't waver. "If you know my name, you must have heard."

The feed had indeed been talking about it: Vince Lighting was the reigning champion but it was generally believed tomorrow's race would kill him because rumors had it that he was growing insensitive to the reflex-sharpening drug necessary to survive the race track. Many champion racers met their end that way, refusing to admit the drug was no longer effective and making one final, mortal mistake.

Rand grunted in acknowledgement.

"Tomorrow's my last," Vince said breezily. "Either I win or I die. I'm betting on the first one myself so I'm going to need a retirement plan."

"Can you pilot an Eagle 34?"

"Are you kidding me? I learned to pilot on one of them. Great ships. You made a good deal trading it for the recon. Tony wouldn't even sell it to me."

"Not so loudly," he growled. He didn't want it advertised he'd sold off a ship belonging to the army. Thankfully the loud music and human chatter ensured their words were drowned and lost before they reached anybody else's ears.

"I'll beat it," Vince went on. "Your ship. Army material is tough, but it's not made for racing. You should bet on me. You'll make a killing since they're lowering the odds on me."

The man's confidence appealed to Rand. This was a guy who knew everybody was already planning his funeral and meant to prove them wrong.

"Survive tomorrow's race and we'll talk about it," he said. He'd enjoy having an ex-racer for pilot, but he still had to find out whether this man was trustworthy enough to keep quiet about Kyuzo. He hadn't gone through all this trouble just to see his new friend endangered again. And, too, it remained to be seen whether this Vince Lighting would survive the race.

Vince motioned to the bartender, who slid two bottles his way with the speed of someone who knows his customers well. "Time for my good-luck ritual! Two beers, one fuck and zero worrying."

Rand lifted an eyebrow. "Are you offering?"

"You could look a little flattered. There's a ton of girls and boys willing to fall at my feet in here."

"Why don't you pick one of them?"

"Frankly, they creep me out. Some of them are aroused by the fact I might die tomorrow."

"Creepy," he agreed, implicitly agreeing to everything else too.

They finished their respective drinks, discouraged a few fangirls and headed out. Vince said he had a room in a nearby hotel, close enough to walk rather than take a hovercab. Though it was late, it was neither cold nor dark: space stations were lit and heated at all hours. The overhead lights had only been dimmed to signify night-time.

Rand approved of the fact Vince had chosen a small, quiet hotel instead of the fancier ones generally favored by the rich and famous. It implied discretion and common sense, two things the rich and famous tended to lack. The room was spacious, clean and adequately furnished with two sitting chairs in front of an entertainment system, a food and drink dispenser, a computer terminal on a desk and a large bed. Beside this bed was a nightstand on which rested a bottle of lube and a bright pink vibrator of a respectable size.

Rand snorted, picking it up. "Pink?"

"Glow in the dark, too," Vince said cheerfully. "It does the job."

"I do the job, too." He abandoned the toy and unzipped his plain blue suit, which he'd bought to replace his army uniform. He felt no shame under Vince's gaze, confident in his rugged looks. He couldn't be called pretty and handsome was pushing it, but he knew people viewed him as manly and sexually attractive: otherwise he wouldn't get sex as often as he did.

Vince had nothing to do with 'rugged' and everything to do with 'handsome'. He was a tall, graceful man with a youthful face, a hairless body and soft flesh instead of hard muscles. Had his

jaw been less squared and his nose more delicate, he might have been called pretty. His suit looked good on him, and even better off.

Suits, boots and other pieces of clothing were strewn on the floor until they stood naked. Rand grinned and Vince pounced on him, his weight forcing them both down onto the bed. Hands scrambled for cocks, jump-starting the game.

Rand pinned Vince down with his face into the pillow and leaned to bite the Asian man's neck hard. Then he removed his weight, sitting up and reaching to seize lube and toy. Vince was peering at him, emitting no objection, so he poured clear liquid over the toy and reached down to Vince's firm ass. He pushed the toy inside with two hard shoves, causing Vince to hiss lowly and lift his ass until he was on his knees, his face still in the pillow and his long ponytail spilled across his shoulders.

Grasping the toy, Rand moved it back and forth, slow and deep. It was not slick but ribbed, to enhance the feeling of penetration. Soft moans and the occasional startled cry were the only sounds in the room.

The toy was eventually discarded. After pouring lube on himself, Rand filled the slimmer man with his own thick, eager cock. The warmth was welcoming, the tightness delicious. Vince stirred, pushing himself up on his elbows and spreading his legs further to match their heights. Then he began to push back, eager for cock, and made flattering appreciative noises.

"That's good," Vince said, tilting his head to the side. "Bit faster?"

Rand complied, leaning over Vince to rest his hands on the bed on either side of him and using the leverage to move his hips faster and harder, slamming into hot, soft flesh over and over. Vince jerked his hips along, occasionally letting out a gasp of near-pain but never slowing down. Perhaps he liked the edge of pain.

Rand came with a low moan of his own, continuing to jerk his hips to stimulate his cock made extra sensitive from ejaculation. He leaned on his partner's back and panted a moment to restore the oxygen flow to his brain. Vince's demanding wiggling recalled him to duty and he wrapped a hand around the slimmer man's under-stimulated cock, squeezing and rubbing until semen shot over his hand.

Moans faded away, replaced by panting, then mere breathing. Vince rolled over on his back and stretched, cat-like. "Great fun," he told the ceiling. "I'd love to have a 'boss with benefits'."

Rand snorted. He used the sheets to wipe himself off and began to dress again. He liked having sex with people; sleeping with them, not so much. "I need to get back to my ship."

"Sure, sure. Remember to bet on me. You'll regret it if you don't. They're offering great odds. Wait for me after the race. I do want that job."

After leaving the hotel, Rand spent a moment thinking before going to the betting desk—which would be open all night and only close five minutes before the race began—and putting a

hundred credits on Vince. It was most of what he'd made selling the army supplies there had been in the recon ship. He had credits in his account but he dared not touch it for fear of alerting the army to his whereabouts—and to his continued breathing. Last they knew, he was in the hands of the Quaans. With any luck they would write him off as dead.

If he lost his bet, the remaining credits would hardly feed them for a week, especially since Kyuzo couldn't process the reconstituted food that they called rations and therefore needed expensive biological food.

He returned to the Eagle 34 and felt a childish thrill as the door opened in answer to his fingerprint and voiceprint. He'd never expected to own a spaceship and certainly not one as large as this one. It was meant for a crew of six or seven, featuring multiple cabins, a spacious common room, a well-equipped training room and a cargo bay big enough to store a whale. The cargo bay was empty at the moment and his footsteps echoed as he made his way upstairs and to his cabin—the *captain's* cabin. Hitting the intercom button, he let Kyuzo know he was back onboard and went to sleep unusually content.

* * * *

Rand wondered how long he could stand this level of noise before going deaf. He'd collected his winnings; now he waited to collect his new pilot. He'd seen Vince come in, but the champion had been mobbed and taken out of his sight. Sipping his drink and feeling rather satisfied about the five thousand credits in his pocket, he was content to wait.

Vince eventually appeared at his side, his long hair a tangled mess and his racing suit half peeled off. "Save me," he gasped. There was a girl with a hold on his arm, trying to pull him to her, and more on the way.

Rand stood, wrapped a strong arm around Vince and swept him away from the crazy fans. He was not a tall man—this to his great chagrin—but he had wide, strong shoulders and he knew how to use them to get through a crowd. His glowering expression helped, too. They reached the door and suddenly there was fresh, unpolluted air to breathe. The air purifier inside the bar was either broken or unable to cope with so much cigarette smoke.

"Here you go," he told the slim pilot.

Vince glanced about nervously but there wasn't anyone in sight—people celebrating outside bars exposed themselves to stiff fines for disturbing the peace. He kept walking, pulling Rand along, and his face was devoid of its usual grin. "We better get to your ship. Some people aren't happy I won. They think I faked the whole tolerance thing. The medics say otherwise, but angry people aren't logical people."

In light of this warning, the sound of the bar's door opening behind them seemed threatening. The voice that angrily called after them only confirmed the threat.

“Hey! Lightning! Get back here you filthy mudder or I’ll shoot you in the back!”

“Goddamned drunken idiot...” Vince stopped and turned back. “What do you want, Ginger? It’s not my fault I’m better than you even when the drug’s letting me down.”

Rand turned, too, but with his laser out and armed. The bald man who had made the threat was dead before he could realize he wasn’t the only armed one around, his gun bouncing harmlessly on the ground as he collapsed.

“You didn’t have to kill him,” Vince said. “He was just drunk.”

“He was armed,” Rand countered, giving the empty street a nervous look of his own. “Come on.” He hadn’t obtained new identification papers yet and simply could not afford to be interrogated by the police, who would be called the minute someone else stumbled over the body.

They hurried to the docks. On space stations of some importance, there was a guarded gate between the docks and the station itself. There was no such thing here: one minute they were surrounded by buildings, the next they were in an open space with dozens of docking ramps leading to a variety of ships. One of them was an Eagle 34, a grey, battered-looking ship that would likely outlive the sleek red bullet model docked at its side.

They were spotted: three men who had been lounging near a docking ramp began to move their way. They did not look friendly.

“Not icy,” Vince said, breaking into a run toward the Eagle.

Rand followed, holding his laser in hand. The metallic docking ramp shook under their feet as they raced up to the door. He slammed his hand on the lock pad, gasping out his name. “Rand Lavern. Open!”

They slid inside to safety just as new, unwelcome footsteps echoed on the ramp. When their pursuers arrived at the top, the door was sealed and nothing short of a plasma gun would have breached it.

“Andromeda’s tits, why are these people so angry at you?” Rand panted. “Those guys didn’t run like drunk men!”

“I think,” Vince panted back, “that those are Lan’s men. The bet-taker. I sent my agent to put all my money on myself... If I lost, I wouldn’t care, and if I won, I’d need a retirement fund.”

“How much?”

“That I put down? I don’t know, ten thousands?”

Rand whistled. “You bet ten thousands? At one to five, that makes you filthy rich. Why would you want to work for me? You could buy your own ship.”

“And have nothing left, yeah. I’d rather be on somebody else’s ship and keep my credits for fun time. Anyway, if you let me pilot, I’ll work for cheap.”

Something about the way Vince said it made Rand frown. “Why wouldn’t I let you pilot?”

The racer waved a casual hand. “You know the statistics, right? Spaceship racers who get drug-tolerant have a bad track record when it comes to taking up normal piloting jobs. Lots of people wouldn’t let me touch their ship. Don’t worry about it. I’m not that far gone. Can I see the cockpit?” He was already heading toward it, leaving Rand to gape at his back. He hadn’t known about any such statistics!

Vince sighed in pleasure upon sighting the control panels, which Rand found huge and clunky, and sank in the pilot’s chair to run his hands on the various buttons and switches. “Hello, beauty.”

“I think we should leave,” Rand said, looking at the screen that showed him the ship’s passenger door. The three men were still there, discussing and gesturing wildly. One of them was speaking into his ID bracelet, which could double as a communication device. “Can you take us out?”

“No problem, Captain,” Vince said. “I’ll send in our take off request. Oh, is there other crew I should meet?”

“Later. For now, try not to kill us.”

Vince gave him a sunny smile.

Grumbling and hoping for the best, Rand left the cockpit and went to the common room, first door on the right. The door on the left led to the workout room and sanitary facilities while the door at the far end of the corridor led to the machinery room, where Kyuzo was residing. He’d have to introduce the Quaan to Vince soon, and hope Vince was as easy going as he seemed. Otherwise, he would have to do something unfortunate.

“Still need to find out how to make money, too,” he mumbled to no one. Vince might have been rich, but he wasn’t. He needed to decide how they would keep themselves fed and keep the ship in working order. Small time piracy, he supposed. A cargo ship like this was versatile. Perhaps if he hired some muscles...

“Everybody strap down,” Vince’s cheerful voice called over the intercom. “We have permission for lift off. We’ll be gone as soon as the engines warm up. Survival chances look pretty good.”

* * * *

Rand was inspecting the menu on the ration dispenser, wondering what he might try today. He’d done the stocking himself, which ensured the food they had was halfway decent, taste-wise. No more goddamned army rations!

Vince peered into the room, a hand on the wall to keep himself from drifting. They were in space now and the ship's gravity was lower than standard gravity, allowing them to drift instead of walk around the ship. "Captain? Two things. First, do we have destination? And second... Are we supposed to have a Quaan aboard?"

Rand froze, his mind scrambling to understand how Vince could have found out so early: the machinery room was locked!

Vince entered, holding in the curve of his arm a small blue critter with tentacles. "This is a Quaan right? Is it a child? I'm pretty sure they're supposed to be bigger. They're bigger in holos, anyway."

"I don't know what in space that is," he said and it was the truth. It certainly looked like a Quaan with its eight tentacles and half-moon eyes, but it was much smaller and much bluer. Kyuzo's color was more of a blue grey; this thing was bright blue. Baby blue even.

Concern appeared on Vince's face. "It's not supposed to be here, then? How'd it get aboard? Where are the parents?" The critter wiggled and he absently pat it on the head, making a shushing noise.

"I'm pretty sure I know that one." Knowing he would be followed, Rand strode out of the common room and to the machinery room. He grabbed two of the breathing masks he'd hung at the door and gave one to Vince.

He inputted the code, yanked Vince inside as the door opened and closed it again behind them. The twin engines, the suppressor and a host of other important pieces of machinery were in here. So was a large alien with tentacles. Kyuzo had no issues with the low gravity, able to hold herself down to the floor with her tentacles' suction cups.

"Kyuzo," Rand growled. "Did you just give birth on my goddamned ship? You could have told me you were pregnant!" He was beginning to feel something akin to panic: he knew nothing about babies, human or otherwise. Kyuzo's tentacles writhed under his gaze and he knew he was distressing her. He tried to calm down by doing the presentations. "Vince, this is Kyuzo, our mechanic. Kyuzo, this is Vince and he's going to be our pilot. He's apparently found the baby."

Vince looked from Kyuzo to the mini Quaan to Rand. "So," he said on an amused tone, "are you the father?"

"Shut up." Rand took Kyuzo's offered tentacle, expecting an explanation.

This one has not procreated. This one has created a subunit to help conduct maintenance. It is a tool. Remote controlled. The subunit was inspecting air ducts when it was intercepted.

"So it's not a baby, just a robot," he said aloud for Vince's benefit. "Fine. You could have told me."

“You could have told me, too,” Vince said dryly. “How’d you find a Quaan? The human side isn’t safe for them.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you, moron,” he snapped. He felt vastly irritated but also relieved. Relieved there wasn’t a real baby aboard and relieved Vince took the situation in stride. Then again, he was a career pilot. Space did weird things to people who stared at it all the time.

Vince seemed to follow his thoughts. “I’m not space-gone. My mind’s fine. But I spent time on New Earth Station and I made a couple of Serpentine friends there. They think Quaans are good people and I trust their judgment a lot more than I trust my fellow humans’.”

“You can be friends with Serpentes?” Rand said. ‘Serpentine’ was a human-given name because that alien species’ real name could not be spoken with a human tongue. Like the name hinted, Serpentes were snake-like in body and mind. Rand had always thought they were too cold and remote to understand a concept like friendship.

An alarm began to sound, interrupting their conversation. There were no words, nothing but the eerie ringing.

Rand frowned. “Now what?”

Vince mirrored his frown. “That’s a collision warning. But I didn’t see anything on the radar. We might be getting tailed from the station, if someone launched right after us....”

“Andromeda’s tits, what did you *do* to these people?”

“I won. They didn’t.” Vince shrugged. “You have no idea how much backstabbing, murdering and revenging happens around racers. Though this does seem like overkill.”

“Don’t stand there, go get us out of the trouble you caused!”

Vince complied, opening the door and using hands and feet to propel himself toward the cockpit. Rand did the same after telling Kyuzo to prepare for a potential impact. The visual in the cockpit confirmed Vince’s assessment: someone had taken off right behind them, disregarding safety rules, and was catching up at an alarming pace. Vince slid in the pilot’s chair, snapped the buckle in place and sent his fingers dancing on the controls.

“Sit down,” he ordered.

Rand did, settling in the only other chair, the one meant for the captain.

The Eagle began to accelerate, pushing them into their seats. “We can’t compete on speed. That’s your army ship back there. I suppose you don’t want me to hail a patrol. Law bad and all that?”

“Bad,” he agreed. “Also bad, the weapons on that ship. It’s a recon, but it still has some firepower. If they get too close...”

“Hold on.” It was all the warning Vince gave before altering their course dramatically and pointing the ship straight at the huge asteroid field that had served as the championship’s racetrack. “Going manual,” he announced.

“This is not a race ship,” Rand pointed out, not without alarm.

“Pretty sure that guy back there isn’t a racer,” Vince said amiably. “Not on the drug either.”

“Neither are you!”

“Hey, I did this track nearly sober this morning. I can do it again.”

“Not a race ship!” Rand said again, watching the asteroids grow closer, bigger. Pebbles grew to boulders, boulders grew as large as the ship, then grew some more.

“Good thing! It’s the speed that kills people. And distractions, so do shut up and let me work!”

They were in. One second the asteroids were ahead of them, the next they surrounded them, seemingly appearing out of nowhere to zoom past chillingly close. It seemed impossible to keep track of the huge rocks, never mind avoid them, but Vince jerked the ship right, left, up and down, somehow keeping them alive and whole. He hummed as he worked, a cheery sound at odds with the certain doom they faced.

The visual from the back camera showed receding rocks but no pursuing ship and the radar was incapable of telling the difference between the hundreds of hurling rocks and a spaceship. Still, they must be out there, somewhere behind.

An enormous asteroid shifted in their path, forcing Vince to pull up hard and push acceleration further than was safe for their human bones—but nothing about an asteroid field was safe. The engines screamed and metal groaned as it brushed against stone, making the ship shudder and sway. They rose above the asteroid, only to duck again to avoid its friends. A speeding pebble hit the cockpit’s window and Rand’s heart skipped a beat, but the sturdy plasteel held, not a crack to be seen.

As suddenly as they’d entered it, they were out of the danger area. Calm darkness surrounded them, no object hurling itself at them—or them at it. The darkness was deep and made space look empty and lonely; they could not see the stars shine because the nearby planet’s light hid them from their eyes.

It hadn’t taken long, two minutes at most. Vince had crossed the asteroid field at its thinnest point, Rand guessed, to minimize the danger. The guy wasn’t quite as crazy as he pretended to be.

“Sorry,” Vince said sheepishly. “I think there’s some damage to the underside. I’ll pay for it.”

Rand unclenched his hands from the seat’s armrests. “Think the other guy made it?”

“I’m not sure he tried to follow. Fifty percent chance he was too sane to try, fifty percent he did try and blew up. You don’t enter a course like that without a serious dose. Unless you’re me.”

Rand laughed and laughed in unexplainable mirth. “I think we’re keeping you.”