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Space Race



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Ever since man learned to oppress animals, there have been races. Once people got off the planet, it wasn't long before people started racing spaceships. A spaceship race is one part piloting experience, one part guts, one part daring, two parts engineering, and about twelve parts cheating. Sure, there are rules, but rules are meant to be broken, aye? It's winning, that's what counts.

From the outside, the *Shining Jewel* is the perfect example of a ship which is the very apodeme of rule compliance. You can scan it all you like, but every scan will turn up normal. Jason made a few modifications himself, you understand. Which is why the *Shining Jewel* has placed first in the last twelve races running. She upset all the local favorites. Dashing the hopes and fortunes for more than on oddsmaker. Right now, there are some people who downright hate us.

The bridge smelled like oiled metal and Butch Bronson's cheap cologne. The air was filled with static electricity. You could feel the rumble of the engines in the deck plates. There was a slight hum in the background. The type of noise loose fitting components make, which was annoying difficult to locate. If you pressed your hand down on the console, it stopped. Only to return when you lifted your palm.

We didn't take the *Shining Jewel* out front in the Sigma Nine to Alpha Twelve Derby right from the start. We didn't want to make it look like we were cheating from the get-go, did we? We wanted everything to look like it was all on the up and up. Straight shooting. At least until we got out of scanning range. Poor bastards, they won't know what hit them.

"Out of range," Alyson reported.

"OK, Morlock, let's get cracking," Jason growled.

Jason, naturally as the pilot, is devilishly handsome, if I do say so myself. Mr. Bronson and Alyson were rather attractive, but Morlock was everything but. About four feet tall, the chunky alien was a ball of green. With only one or two hairs sticking out of his wrinkled head, they poked up like some sad version of a broken wire brush. The pointy ears wouldn't have been too outlandish if there hadn't have been four of them. Alyson still didn't get why with all those ears, Morlock needed the bug antennae as well. Ugly to a fault, he was a genius with engines, so I was happy to keep him around. With human beings, you always had to be some kind of brain-wizard if you had the misfortune of being ugly.

"We're gonna get caught you know." Morlock protested.

"Beats losing. I've got a lot of money riding on this. We all do."

"Shit," Alyson muttered. She had a decidedly unfriendly look on her face. Jason could tell she knew he had bet their money too.

Morlock flipped a few switches on the control board and a secret panel flipped into place. Rotating the old panel underneath the new one. He activated two more switches. The *Shining Jewel* shook as two extra engines folded out of the ship. There was a sudden jolt as they ignited.

"Yahoo!" Jason screamed. "Get along little doggies."

Red lights began to flash on the walls, klaxons rang. Morlock looked at the readouts. "Yep, we got boarders in engineering."

"Morlock, Alyson, Butch, why don't you go down there and give our guests a proper welcome?"

“What about you?” Alyson asked. “You just going to sit on your ass up here while we do all the dirty work.”

“Asteroids field coming up, love. Someone’s got to pilot her, sweet cakes.”

Alyson grumbled, but she knew Jason was right. She never liked flying through the asteroid fields.

“You want to keep your cute little ass, mate. It such a fine little ass too,” Jason told her.

“You’re a pig,” Alyson replied.

“Don’t I know it.”

The three of them, Butch Bronson, Alyson and Morlock got out three energy lasers from the armory locker on the way down to engineering. The air was filled with clicks and metallic snaps as they readied their weapons. Butch took station on one side of the door and Alyson and Morlock on the other. Butch waved his hand and Morlock pressed the controls. The door opened with a hiss.

Butch took one glance in and pulled his head right out. He gave a slashing motion across his throat with his hand. “What?” Morlock asked.

“Close the damn door!” he yelled. Bright bursts of energy started coming through the open door as Morlock fiddled with the controls. Finally, he got the door shut.

“There’s not a few in there,” Butch protested, “It’s more like thirty.”

They were so outnumbered, it was like being guests at your own massacre.

“I think it’s time for Plan B” Morlock added.

“Right you are.” Butch declared.

Morlock pressed a few more buttons on the panel next to the door. Inside engineering, Blank panels slid up into the ceiling. Out poured at least a dozen creatures. They were vaguely crocodile-like but seven-foot tall with long pointy tails. Instead of walking on all fours, they stood on their hind legs. Their front legs were coiled up like arms about to strike. At the ends, were six-inch-long dagger-like claws.

Before the boarding party could even react, two of the creatures had bitten the heads off the interlopers. A third had used his claws to gut another one, spilling his intestines on the cabin’s floor. The lights flickered and then when out. Now all anyone could see in the darkness was the glowing yellow eyes of the reptilian defenders.

Yet soon the room was aglow with the blasts of lasers and energy weapons. The sudden increase in light made a mockery of the scene, almost as if the room was in some horrific funhouse. Most of the energy blasts went wild, but a critical few found their marks. Still, numbers and technology can master any demon, even in the dark, right? Screams and cries filled the room from floor to ceiling. A pair of laser shots tore off the arm of one of the reptilian creatures, exposing its bones.

Only they weren’t bones. What was released into the air, besides a spray of blood and gore, was a stainless-steel rod of a robotic arm. The creature shoved the now exposed, shining pole into the chest of one of his attackers. Blood spurted out of the wound like a firehose gone berserk. He removed the

spasming body from the stump of his arm by throwing it across the room. In the gloom, the dead man crashed into another of the invaders, knocking him to the ground.

More heads were crushed between double rows of long teeth, then the creatures started putting their tails into action. Giant sweeps were taking men off their feet. One blast of an energy weapon went through the head of a companion as the first man was taken off his feet by the reptilian appendage. The headless corpse fell to the floor with a sickening thud.

The floor became greasy with blood and slime. What had first appeared to be plasma from the creatures, turned out to be oil, used to lubricate their working parts. The mixture of blood, guts, and oil made standing in the room an exercise in futility ... at least for the visitors. Bones crunched, and limbs snapped as the fight devolved. In desperation, the interlopers lobbed grenades about the room. The deafening explosions were more intended to disable the ship's operation than act as a defense against the giant lizards. The light from the blasts blinded everyone, but then there was silence.

Morlock pressed the door control again. A white smoke cloud drifted up and out of the door, filling the narrow passageway. Branson looked in the open door and then snapped his head out with a sudden jerk as before. He motioned to the engineer and the small alien sealed the door once more.

"Still too many?" Alyson asked.

"Nope, but it's a real mess in there. I'm not cleaning it up." Butch tossed his weapon over to Alyson and she caught it with a loud snap. "I don't know why we bother. We should always go with Plan B." Branson proposed. There was a deep shutter. Not from a grenade this time. It felt like something had hit the hull of the ship. Something big.

"You don't think ..." Alyson murmured.

"Yep," Butch replied. "He's taking the short cut." All three headed back up to the bridge.

Jason was busy dodging rocks the size of small cities. They dashed about like housewives at a 50% off shoe sale. Which would have been OK, except for the flashes. Someone had decided to keep the *Shining Jewel* from taking the short cut by mining the asteroid field. Explosions rocked the ship. This bouncing around would have made it near impossible to pilot the ship in open space, with all the extra rocks flying about, it was a living nightmare.

"Alyson," Jason roared, "get on the deflectors. Morlock, see what you can do to counter us being thrown around as if we were a soccer ball at a world cup game.

"On it," Alyson replied.

"Butch give me a hand here." Morlock and Butch leaned over and pulled on a big lever which protruded from the floor. On a steady deck, it could have been operated by one. But in this rocking nightmare, it required both of them to activate the apparatus. Once engaged, a gimble in the room was released. They acted like coils in a telescope, keeping the bridge steady despite being jostled like a building in an earthquake.

The rocks still flew at the *Shining Jewel* like angry serpents in a bad mood, by Jason was able to avoid most of them. "Deflectors down to 25 percent," Alyson announced.

“Just a few more seconds,” Jason suggested.

“You’re cutting it mighty close,” Alyson complained. Before she could even complete her sentence, Jason ran smack into a huge boulder.

“Correction,” she commented, “Shields down. One more hit and we’ll be smashed into kitty litter.”

As if they heard the navigator’s comment, four good sized rocks headed straight toward the *Shining Jewel* from four separate directions. Jason weaved right and then left. In between, he performed an up/down jig which would have surpassed any roller-coaster in making the crew sick ... even with the gimbles on. Just before the room was about to be redecorated with a coat of vomit paint, the sky returned to its normal mixture of black with a smattering of bright stars in the distance.

Everyone’s face was white as a sheet and it wasn’t from being sick.

“We lost one and six,” Jason announced. “Morlock, see what you can do with one. Butch, take a look at six.”

“What do you want me to do?” Butch protested, “I’m no bleeding mechanic.”

Jason gave him the evil eye. “Just shut up and take a look at it. Just look. Call in and maybe Morlock here can tell you what to do, OK?”

“Whatever you say, boss. But I gotta warn you, I broke my mom’s speedster, simply by opening the hood.”

“Get going,” Jason snarled.

“Now what?” Alyson asked in a tense voice. The ship shuttered and shook. To anyone trained in piloting, *Shining Jewel* was inches away from rattling herself into a debris cloud of used pieces. Even Alyson could tell this was about as bad as things could get ... and she didn’t believe in miracles.

“Now, we pour on the speed,” Jason declared.

Jason the type who is driven to win at any cost. For him, it’s an internal struggle. The kind of fight you have with yourself when everyone else is excelling and you’re on the fast track to go nowhere. The stage in life where you must make a name for yourself because everyone else said you couldn’t. Either you do something or take the long walk to oblivion. Most people would have given up at this stage of the game, but not Jason.

He simply wasn’t the grinding type of guy. For Jason, there was either the top of the heap or a one-way tour of the inside of a coffin. Which is why Jason loves racing. All the action you could ever want and the added challenge of cheating and not getting caught. But even then, it wasn’t so much the challenge as the direction. Focus Jason on a direction and he’s like a mad dog chasing a bone. OK, maybe he’s a bit more like a bunny. Afraid of work, afraid of commitment, afraid of responsibility, afraid of everything really ... except for speed. Most of the human race wants to slow down when things got hairy. But for Jason, too much speed is when he starts to get excited. It’s his drug. If Jason had a single motto it would be ... *pour on the speed*.

Alyson? Well, Alyson just wanted to get rich. But you can't spend your money if you're dead. Which would explain the furrowed brow and the look of distress on her face.

"How's it look down there?" Jason called over the intercom.

Morlock's voice crackled over the speaker. "Well if you were planning a garage sale where the principle product for sale is destroyed and damaged engine parts, you'd be in business."

"So, no hope huh?"

Once more, the speaker crackled to life. "It didn't say it was hopeless, just a mess. Give me a minute or two."

"How's Bronson doing?"

Morlock sounded morose. "Butch? Well if I can get him to overcome his unreasonable fear of electricity and plug in some loose wires we'll be fine."

"I'll get him some treatment when we get back. Thanks, Morlock."

For the next twenty minutes, everyone was running around applying the technological equivalent of band-aids to keep the ship from rattling apart. Morlock got the number one engine back online and was busy talking Butch through his fear of live electrical cables. Alyson was spending time trying to coax more power out of the generators when she wasn't busy putting out electrical fires. And snapping back at Jason's sexist remarks.

The COMM unit flickered to life. At first, Jason thought Alyson had caused another electrical malfunction, but Brodie appeared on the screen. He wore a suit so covered in gold, gems, chains and bold white fur he would have been mistaken for the Bishop of Rome in any other age. He'd been our manager from the beginning. A man who knew how to recognize a diamond in the rough and mold him into a winner. Brodie could see things others simply ignored. He saw it in me, back in the days when Jason was only good at hiding in garbage pits. He saw the shining spark in all of them. He was an expert at opportunity.

"I see you're still in the race," Brodie commented.

"First place, Brodie, as usual. Only a few more minutes and well be across the finish line." Jason responded proudly.

"Well, there's a problem."

"Oh," Jason looked bemused, "you know something I don't?"

"What I know is you've been ticking off book-makers in 24 systems. They're not happy."

"So," Jason retorted with glee, "its only money. *Their money.*"

"Yea, well, they offered me more money to make sure you lose this time."

"You want me to stop and let the others pass me?" Jason asked.

Butch and Morlock pulled up behind Jason. Alyson looked over at him plaintively. “Would you?” Brodie asked.

“No.” The crew of the *Shining Jewel* returned serious smiles at Jason’s indignation. “Why would you even ask me?”

“Just covering all my bases. I like to be through. I expected this would be your answer, so I’ve planted a bomb on my ship.” Brodie held up a remote-control device with a single red button on it. He flipped up the clear plastic cover and a tiny screen started flashing ... it read armed. “You sure you won’t change your mind?”

“One,” Jason snorted, “It’s not your ship, it’s mine. And two, no.”

“Pity. I could have used you. Comebacks are always profitable.”

“I wouldn’t press your button there, Brodie. Don’t you think the judges will think something is up if we simply blow up short of the finish line?”

“You have to take some risks. You should be pleased, you’re the one who taught me winning is everything.”

“So, let us win then,” Jason spat.

“Sorry, too much money in your losing. Looks like only I can win today.”

“Wait!” Jason yelled.

Brodie pressed the red button. There was a red-yellow flash on the screen and then it went back to the static it was displaying before.

“Sorry, Brodie.” Jason sighed, “I like to cover all my bases too.”

The *Shining Jewel* raced across the finish line. Somewhere, out in the vastness of the universe, several hundred bookies were screaming.