

BE QUICK OR BE DEAD

A

Story

Written

by

Alex Napoli

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The year was 2149. The Arcadia System, five years traveling distance from Earth, was the new frontier of exploration and enrichment. Planet A-4 was the ground of the most precious mineral on Earth: the black diamond.

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A round trip to this frontier, where civilization and the law had barely reached, may be the distance to a man's fortune. The long and dangerous journey was only the beginning of what would be a deadly adventure for the majority who dared to try it. Half would not even reach Black Diamond as it was most commonly known. Nine out of ten would never return.

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For those who were lucky enough to reach it, most would regret their luck and be the victims of the harsh living conditions: fast changing weather including a deadly acid rain; risk of over exposure to the rays of the Arcadia Star during the day; sand tornadoes that formed and struck unexpectedly; and two predators that hunted anything that moves or breaths, striking so fast

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and with such precision as the Earth's rattlesnakes but with one small difference: they were one hundred times its size.

The red serpent lived in the sandy underground, striking its prey on the neck and pulling it under. It dissolved the victims' internal organs with an acid venom and sucked them dry.

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The black bird was a gigantic
flying ostrich with a guillotine beak
that ripped its prey's head off, before
it feasted on the victims' body,
cutting through the flesh like a sharp
ax.

All other species were annihilated
by these predators that now fed on
each other and on the new species in
town: humans.

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But nothing was more dangerous for the fortune seekers than their own species: the pirates. No man or woman carrying a black diamond was safe from the greed of other men who avoided the high risk work of mining the stones and sought the easier way of preying on who may seem weaker.

In the Black Diamond planet there was no law and the survival was of

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the quickest. Quick enough to draw
a weapon, fast enough to escape an
attack, from the ground, from the air,
from space, from anywhere. To
survive you must be quick or be
dead.

There were the few heavily armed
and well equipped expeditions
financed by Earth's big mining and
space exploration corporations, and
there were the thousands of

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independent miners taking their own chances. There was no contact with Earth, no communication system powerful enough to reach Earth. News traveled by mouth with the incoming or outgoing star ships. Food, equipment and other supplies brought from Earth were almost as valuable as the black diamonds. Heavily guarded merchants

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prospered exchanging supplies for
the precious black stone.

A new expedition approached
the system. It was the biggest and
most expensive exploration effort
ever made. Its goal was to bring law,
security, organization and higher
productivity for the mining of the
Black Diamond planet. A joint-
venture of several mining

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companies, this heavily armed expedition had the approval and backing of the United Nations from Earth.

The current mining process of the black diamond was done by randomly searching through the soft sand. The danger during the mining came from the deadly predators. If the miner was fast enough to survive and lucky enough to find a black

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diamond he had to deal with cruel
men looking to short cut their way to
fortune at the expense of anyone's
life.

Selling the stones on the ground to
a mining company in exchange for a
nominal check spared part of the risk
of carrying the stone. The check
carried the DNA code of the owner
and only could be cashed on Earth.
Delivering the stones to a Merchant

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starship orbiting the planet could double the price if the miner survived the pirates that attacked any aircraft leaving the planet's atmosphere. Taking it to a merchant starship at the limit of the Arcadia system could triple the price. Delivering it directly to Earth would pay at least twenty times more.

Captain Steve commanded the United Nations battle starship

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escorting the incoming expedition.

Its the first time a government military vessel was sent to the system. The expenses were being covered by the companies owning the rest of the five star ships forming the fleet bringing the latest technology to mine the black diamond. This equipment was suppose to triple the productivity of exploration of the precious stone.

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Old fashioned sand divers should become obsolete. A conflict with the sand diving miners was expected to develop. Also the military starship would orbit the planet and give protection against the pirates to the aircrafts living the planet's atmosphere.

Nicko used to be a sand-diver and a transporter of the precious stones. That would have made him a fortune

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when he got back to Earth. But he lost everything for been accused of piracy. His stones were allegedly stolen from a BDM cargo starship. Black Diamond Mining Corporation was the largest mining company exploring the Black Diamond planet. Nicko made a deal with the company to assist the incoming expedition with his experience and expertise. BDM would remove

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charges against him and would allow him to keep the alleged stolen stones after his mission was completed.

Nicko knew he was framed but accepted the deal to get a free ride back to the Arcadia system and to have an opportunity to double his fortune.

The powerful fleet orbited the Black Diamond planet. A BDM

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aircraft was sent down to their principal mining collection site, with Steve and Nicko aboard. They landed in the middle of a sand storm, found out everything had been destroyed and that all employees were dead as they went through rubble and skeletons.

They came across a miner, Janick, who told them that all company financed activities of exploration

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and commerce of the stone had long been eradicated from the planet by the merciless pirates. They ruled all the planet with the exception of few independent fortified miner villages that refused to pay protection to one of the hordes of pirates who tried to rip off the miners any way, on the ground or in space.

The villages paid a sheriff to command their protection system

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and keep the peace among the miners. The closest village to the destroyed BDM site was the Dead Serpent village, where Janick was headed, and which prospered under the protection of Bruce, the fastest gun in the planet, according to Janick.

The miners disliked the presence of the mining companies and the U.N. military forces which were

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seen as siding with corporate

interests. On the other hand they had

a common enemy in the pirates.

The U.N. soldiers soon found out that high class training and equipment wouldn't help them. A red serpent bit one soldier in the neck and pulled him under ground, as Janick tried to help him plunging a knife into the sand, another snake struck him in the neck and dragged

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him down. Nicko dove after him
fastened with an electronic control
safety cord. He automatically
activated the retrieval of the cord,
pulling him out. He said they were
both gone and that he warned
everyone about the snake.

Captain Steve was stunned with
the speed of the predator. Nicko
reminded him that to survive here
you had to shoot on any sign of

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movement and make sure to always
make your presence noticed far
before approaching someone, unless
you didn't mind getting your head
blown off by mistake. Miners
commonly called "behind you"
before approaching someone from
the rear.

Once your body was covered in
the sand you would not be attacked
by the V serpent because it would

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think you were also a serpent. But if
you stuck your head out of the sand
or your movement could be seen
from the surface, you would become
a prey to the black bird. This
carnivorous bird could rip your head
off with a bite. The black bird
preyed on the serpent and vice versa.
They both preyed on humans.

Miners dove in with oxygen
devices and usually wore a helmet

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that may allow survival from the bird's first strike. If you didn't get too dizzy from the blow you had a chance to draw a weapon and shoot down the deadly bird.

In this planet no one trusts anybody. The shell that held the black diamond had a bright shine, so anyone finding one could be spotted from far away by someone who may

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become greedy. Black diamond

miners sand dived alone.

Approaching a miner at work could

be a deadly mistake. Shooting

everything that moves, no questions

asked, was a common survival

precaution.

Miner villages were built over

solid rock formations and had a steel

net covering it. They were safe

places against the predators. But not

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against the pirates who constantly
raided the villages. The village
sheriff was their last defense.

The ground exploration
expedition, protected by the U.N.
Commando received heavy fire as
they approached the Dead Serpent
village. They displayed the United
Nations flag and flashed a blue light
that was suppose to identify U.N.
forces.

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One man walked out of the village towards them, Bruce, the sheriff of the village. He told Captain Steve he recognized the U.N. symbols but that they shouldn't count on that around here. Most of the miners or didn't know them or couldn't care less for U.N. authority. They thought U.N. Forces were at the service of the mining corporations. Bruce said the miners won't allow them in the

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village and advised everyone to seek protection somewhere else. Captain Steve told him they were not looking for protection.

Adrian, the chief of the expedition, vice-president and a major stockholder of BDM, told Bruce they were fully prepared for any hostile actions. Bruce laughed and said they would have plenty of

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opportunity to test whatever he called “prepared”.

Adrian wanted Steve to command an invasion of the village. Steve disagreed. The miners were not threatening the expedition, they just didn't welcome it. Nicko suggested a little diplomacy: offering money, an irresistible buying price for their stones; offering protection; offering supplies at low prices.

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Adrian loved the idea. Steve told Bruce the U.N. forces were bringing law and order for the benefit of everyone, not only the mining companies.

A cloud of sand was seen in the horizon. Steve asked if that was a sand storm coming. Bruce said it was worse and went back to the village.

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Nicko warned it was a pirate raid and that they should get prepared for heavy combat. Adrian suggested to let them strike the village and after come to the rescue.

The pirates approached on ground vehicles and on aircrafts. Steve said they could be easily destroyed with a Thunder Gun, a shoulder launched energy rocket delivering a mini

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nuclear fusion explosion contained in a short range. Steve ordered the soldier carrying the device to wait. He wanted to let the miners on their own as they wanted. They would intervene only if necessary. Nicko disagreed.

The battle went on, both sides seemed even, villagers and pirates were killed. Nicko asked Steve if they weren't suppose to bring law

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and order. Steve calmly ordered his

man to shoot with precision rifles.

The pirate aircrafts and vehicles

were shot down as target bottles.

The pirates returned fire. The U.N.

commando advanced towards the

village. The pirates ran away. A

Thunder Gun rocket was fired

annihilating them.

The expedition advanced towards

the village. The miners were

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impressed with their destruction

power and offered no resistance.

Adrian asked Nicko to go inside the village and make an offer: BDM was prepared to pay UN\$1000 per carrot for all stones the miners had to offer at any time.

Inside the village, as the battle seemed over, a pirate walked out of his wrecked aircraft and started shooting everyone in sight before his

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gun ran out of ammunition. He saw a weapon next to a dead body. Bruce walked towards him and threw his gun down to a similar distance as between the pirate and his desired weapon. The pirate went for it, so did Bruce who gunned him down with one shot. Plus another in the head to make sure he was dead.

Nicko entered the village. He walked around asking for Bruce. A

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man coming from behind struck

Nicko, leaving him unconscious.

The villagers gathered a couple of injured pirates. Nicko joined them as he was mistaken for a pirate.

The villagers wasted no time and got ready to execute their prisoners.

They buried them in the ground leaving only their heads sticking out.

A caged gigantic black bird with a

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black bag on its head was released
chained by the neck. A pole was
used to pull the black bag from the
bird's head. Its first reaction was to
attack the surrounding villagers but
the chain restricted its reach. The
bird noticed the prisoners' heads
sticking out of the ground and
attacked: two strikes, two heads
chopped off.

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Nicko shouted he was not a pirate and then screamed for help as the bird seemed to want more after swallowing the two bloody heads. Bruce came just in time to gun down the killer bird.

He explained to the villagers that Nicko was with the U.N. forces. Nicko was released and relieved explained what he came there for.

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Still catching his breath, he made the black diamond price offer proposal.

A watchman shouted that the U.N. commando was moving again towards the village.

The villagers discussed the proposal. The majority was inclined to except it. They thought they could get better protected and get a good price for their work.

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Bruce was doubtful of the advantages of again doing business with the mining companies. He said that they would end up taking over the business. Their price would go down as soon as they reorganized themselves and started competing for the best mining spots. The majority seemed to agree that the mining companies' money and power would get them whatever they

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wanted and that the best policy was
be to associate with them. Bruce
reminded the miners that the U.N.
forces, they were impressed with,
were no big deal. It wouldn't take
long for the pirates to get their hands
on the latest technology of weapons
the U.N. forces were carrying, and
that they could also do the same.
The majority of the villagers agreed
that Bruce's services were no longer

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needed because the U.N. forces would offer them better protection. Bruce said they could do whatever they wanted and left.

The villagers opened the gates, the BDM expedition and the U.N. commando were welcomed in.

As Bruce was preparing to leave he was questioned by captain Steve about where he intended to go.

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Bruce said he was going to do what everyone in this planet came here for.

An old villager told Adrian that he shouldn't let Bruce go like that because he was the fastest gun on the planet, knew like no one how to survive around here and the most important he knew the best mining spots including the sand bowls.

These lakes of sand, located between

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mountains, were the richest mining spots and also the most dangerous, as they were infested of red serpents and black birds, in what looked like a war zone of prey and predator, where a miner on duty had little chance of survival. Except for Bruce and maybe another one or two.

Adrian called Bruce and offered to hire him. Bruce refused. But as the offer went up he ended up agreeing

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to take a small number of men with him. He was headed to the sand-bowls and made it clear that who ever was coming with him would probably never come back. Bruce, Nicko, Adrian, Steve, two soldiers and one of the village's most experienced miners, Dave, went on this exploration mission.

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Adrian had no fear of Bruce's warnings. He was confident that their high tech equipment was something that this stone age planet hadn't seen yet. They would be pretty safe and the expedition would be a great opportunity for BDM to map mining sites.

Up in space, the expedition star ships were under heavy attack from

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the pirates. The U.N. battle starship entered in action, blasted pirates in every direction and controlled the situation. But there were heavy losses on the cargo starships. The U.N. commander said they underestimated the power of the outlaws: They were equipped with some late technology weapons.

One starship was boarded and looted while the U.N. starship faced

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a second wave of attack. The boarded cargo ship exploded after the pirates took what they could using a tractor beam.

Zultan, the leader of the pirates captured several crew members and tortured them to know all about their mission. He wanted to know the extension of their power and mining intentions. Zultan obtained the location of Adrian's expedition and

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information on his current mission

of mapping the rich sand bowls.

Also they got information on the

mining project and their goal of

increasing by three times the current

mining output; annihilating the

pirates and establishing a safe

production environment. Zultan and

his men left to the ground to

intercept, rip off and kill Adrian and

whoever was with him.

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Down on the planet, Bruce and Adrian's expedition got to a point where they had to abandon their ground transports and continue on foot. Bruce guided them up a mountainous area. He was looking for what an old miner friend called the richest sand bowl he ever saw. Adrian smiled.

Nicko asked Bruce if he was not worried about finding the site for the

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mining companies. Bruce said they had an agreement and chances were no one would come back alive except himself. It was the closest thing to hell according to his old friend. Adrian said there was nothing they couldn't deal with.

A black bird flew over them. Steve prepared to gun it down. Bruce, suspicious, looked around while everyone else was looking up. Steve

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gunned the bird down. As Adrian was bragging about human technology they walked into an ambush. Another black bird, waiting for them on the ground, struck ripping a soldier's head off. A second bird attacked Adrian so fast he couldn't see it coming. But not faster than Bruce who drew his weapon and shot the bird dead. Adrian was sweating with fear as the

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bird came inches from ripping his head off. Dave said that was a trick: a flying bird up in the sky, far enough not to scare the prey, close enough to take it's attention, while others struck the distracted victim from another direction.

The expedition climbed up the mountain and reached the top of a formation similar to a volcano.

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They were stunned with an
incredible vision: a huge lake of
sand surrounded by thousands of
black birds that dove into the sand
bowl to get their meal or to become
one, as huge red serpents extended
into the air to catch a bird, risking
themselves to also be preyed upon.
A battlefield, a simple but effective
two way chain of life keeping the

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population balance of both

voracious species.

Bruce warned that was the closest they should go. Not far enough: a black bird flew in their direction.

Bruce knocked it down with a single shot without blinking. The bird fell in the sand and got pulled under by a serpent.

Adrian wanted to test his equipment right away. It was a

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mounted sphere carrying a man inside. The device sucked sand on the front end, dumping it on the other end, filtering through the precious stones, while the sphere maneuvered its way through the underground sand.

As Adrian was going in the sand, a soldier was shot in the head and Nicko was wounded in the shoulder.

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A group of pirates, led by Zultan,
had followed them up the mountain
and now opened fire. Steve, Bruce
and Dave returned fire.

The shooting attracted the black
birds. A pirate was bit and dragged
by the head. As the bird flew over
the sand bowl a serpent plunged out
and pulled the pirate down,
struggling with the bird for the prey.

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The bird got the head, the serpent
the body, but before the bird could
gain altitude with its bloody meal, it
was attacked and pulled under by
another serpent, becoming the meal.

The U.N. group was outnumbered
and stuck in cross fire of pirates.

Dave and Bruce jumped in the sand
with their diving gear to escape

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the gun fire. Adrian went

underground with his high-tech

equipment.

Nicko was executed point blank

as the pirates closed in. A flock of

black birds attacked the pirate group

annihilating them, except for Zultan

who escaped running down the hill.

He killed a black bird coming his

way with a knife, slashing its throat.

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Steve escaped to a cave at a higher position shooting everything crossing his site. Meanwhile, Adrian was working his way through the sand amazed with the quantity and quality of the stones that were coming in. A serpent was sucked in Adrian's mining equipment and got grinned up. Its acid venom burned the mechanism. Sand was sucked in but nothing went out. The sand pipe

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ruptured and the sphere started to fill with sand. The sphere was underground but Adrian managed to make his way to the surface. As he came out a black bird bit his head off. A serpent grabbed his leg. The bird kept the head and the serpent dragged under the rest of the body.

Bruce and Dave came out of the sand far from the initial shooting sight. Dave was struck from behind

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by a serpent and pulled under. Bruce tried to help him but was pulled by the leg by another serpent. He slashed the serpent with a knife and got free just in time to draw his gun with the other hand and gun down an approaching black bird. He escaped running down the mountain.

Steve got in contact with the U.N. starship and ordered an aircraft to rescue him.

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The aircraft was followed on its way down the planet's atmosphere by two pirate aircrafts. It destroyed one but was destroyed by the second.

Steve was trapped inside a black bird nest next to a couple of eggs. A black bird entered the nest and got its head blown away. Steve tried to contact the rescue aircraft but got no response. He prepared to make his

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way out of the cave. As he came out he was surprised by what he didn't see: no birds, no serpents, no pirates, nobody, no moving creatures in site. He quickly saw the reason: a tornado in the horizon getting closer very fast. He ran down the mountain.

Bruce caught up to Zultan on his way down. They exchanged fire and sought protection behind rocks.

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Zultan shouted he just wanted the stones Bruce was carrying. Even though Bruce was not carrying any he shouted to Zultan to come and get them because he wanted them too. They exchanged fire again.

Steve headed their way attracted by the shooting. He saw Zultan and got him stuck in a crossfire. Steve signaled Bruce to come his way. Bruce signaled he could approach

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Zultan from behind. Steve insisted demanding Bruce to come his way. Bruce headed to Steve covered by his gunfire. As Bruce got there Steve was tying himself to a rock. A second later behind the mountain appeared the incredible tornado. Steve grabbed Bruce. Zultan tried to hold himself to a rock but got dragged by the spinning wind. After

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the tornado was gone, Steve and

Bruce continued their way down.

Steve contacted the U.N. starship.

They were being boarded by the

pirates who attached several aircraft

to the huge starship, making their

way in rupturing the hull.

The commander in charge was

stuck on the bridge while the pirates

began to cut through the door. The

commander told Steve he was about

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to lose the ship and that he activated the self destruction system. The pirates broke in and slaughtered the remaining crew. The starship exploded before they got to the commander.

On the ground, Steve and Bruce got to the place where they left their vehicles. They were totally destroyed and scattered around because of the tornado. They

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continued their way on foot in the
middle of nowhere.

THE END

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