

“Star Rangers: Part 2: Trepidation”

By

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The small, rounded, cylindrical escape pod with its six flaring proton propulsors jutting from its aft zoomed across the vacuum of space past meteor, star dust, and nebula. Inside the cockpit sat Captain Crimson Falcon, short, green, his three antennae wriggling, and Euleana, tall, slim, her long, rainbow of head tails sparkling in the luster of the multi-colored LEDs of the dashboard controls. They had just received some terrible news and a tip at a pub on Alkatron 6, a tiny mining base on the outer reaches of the Milky Way. Delphi Station, which they had only been aboard 3 days ago, had suddenly and inexplicably exploded, the sudden breaking news reports blared out at them from the screens in the pub. Nobody, the interstellar media reported, knew who, how, or why.

But they did.

“It has to be that despicable little space slug.” Captain Falcon said through gritted teeth.

“I can’t believe it,” Euleana reflected, shaking her head, “That little con-man never left. Let us slip away, infiltrated their ranks, and blew the whole thing to kingdom come.”

“Well, we’re going to find him.” promised the captain. “Long-range sensors show no signs of light jump trails exiting the area. He’s got to still be there, lurking about the wreckage, waiting for a chance to stow away on some investigative vehicle. We’ll nab him.”

“Affirmative.” Euleana said, then she smiled at him. Her heart felt full when he returned it with his own smile.

“He’ll live to tell the tale at his court hearing for war crimes. If he’s lucky.” Captain Falcon declared, then, darkly, the smile disappearing.

A moment of silence between the two.

Captain Crimson Falcon glanced at her, Euleana, one of his oldest friends, and the last survivor along with himself of the ill-fated crew of the Jackhammer, the murderer of whom they now pursued across the stars. After the cloud of gloom resulting from his fell declaration lifted, he smiled at her once more. Raising her head to meet his bright eyes with her bulging, dark, golden brownish black irises, she blushes slightly, a tiny, giddy grin now germinating at the far corner of her mouth.

Euleana flashes back to yesterday evening. They have known each other a long time, she and her former Captain. They were officers together and coworkers and friendly, but never close like this. Trauma, tragedy have brought them together. She remembers his hand cascading through her tentacled alien hair and resting on the small of her back. His lips against hers. The rush. The wonder.

Afterward, because they mutually agreed to take things slow, both being the “old-fashioned” type, so to speak, they still slept in separate motel rooms on the asteroid world on Alkatron 6. One step at a time. Captain Crimson Falcon paid for both the rooms, nonetheless. She had known him for a long time, but never knew he was such a gentleman. So charming. So fun! It was a side of him she had never known existed. She wanted desperately to get to know more of that side of the small, green man who while of mere stature, had a lot to him that she had yet to know.

The feeling was mutual.

The next morning, the news came. Then they gained the tip from a trusted covert acquaintance of the captain's. Along with it, information, of the hacking variety. How to crack into the base code of Intergalactic Ranger tech, to ping the suit that formerly belonged to Marve, their “smiling” comrade, which was now donned by the psychopath they pursued.

A couple of hours later, and their tiny ship dropped to sub-light. They wove in and out of wreckage from the once immense and formidable Delphi Station. The debris from the poor Jackhammer and a certain Zorgoboffian ship flew past the cockpit, too, without ever even the slightest danger of collision, thanks

to Euleana's expert piloting. Captain Falcon glanced over at her without her seeing, awe stricken, his heart fluttering, eyes a twinkling, seeing his dearest friend in this new light.

After a moment the captain shook his head and regained his focus. He flipped down his control panel and flicked several switches and buttons.

"Euleana, I'm commencing the scan." He announced.

"Good. I'll let you know if I see anything on radar- wait, there!" Euleana pointed at a bright, pulsing dot on the green screen of the cylindrical display jutting from her pilot's console, with it's rotating holographic needle.

"That's him!" Captain Falcon roared. "Full speed ahead!"

The tiny craft raced toward the dot, gaining on their foe, getting closer, closer, until finally, Euleana brought the ship to a halt in front of a long, warped and burned piece of metal hull tile, so twisted and deformed they could not tell from what ship it had once been torn.

"Fire all pulse cannons!" Falcon commanded.

"You got it, babe!" Euleana said, activating, aiming, and pulling the appropriate triggers.

Upon hearing "babe" the former Captain of the Star Rangers's green skin blushed, turning from a bright lime to a dark forest hue, and felt his heart beat faster.

The large, looming hull tile erupted violently when the energy discharge hit it, flying apart and ripping asunder, sending superheated shards darting about everywhere.

A cloud of space dust, obstructing the viewer of the escape pod.

Then, a small, rectangular light emerged.

It was the glowing visor of Marve's old spacesuit, it's painted red smile now heavily worn and chipped. The visor's night/densely obstructed space vision was activated! The suit and evil creature within slowly drifted forward, toward the tiny space pod.

“Fire everything at that bastard!” Falcon urged his friend, pilot, and love interest.

He didn’t even have to ask. She had already hit every weapon button and trigger as the words had been forming on his lips.

Rockets, lasers, plasma beams, bombs, pulse cannons and other projectile weaponry came out of suddenly open compartments and contraptions recently welded to the small craft, and hurled their way toward the enemy, lighting up the dark vacuum and leaving ice, dust, and exhaust trails in their wake.

Before any of the bogies could leave the ship on their trajectory, however, the little space man had already preemptively reacted. Pressing a button on his wrist, a large purple electric wave emitted from the suit. It encompassed the captain and Euleana’s ship and knocked it dead. The energy blasts sent from their weapons tubes to him were negated and disappeared. A couple bombs exploded well away from the space suited fiend, and the others sputtered, died, and sat cold and useless in space. Captain Falcon looked urgently at his beloved.

“Do something!”

“I can’t! The controls are dead and the backup batteries were drained! It’ll be 5 minutes before the backups recharge and auxiliary power kicks in! All we got right now is life support!”

“DAMN!” The Captain exclaimed.

In a split second, his mind was made up, its cold calculations complete. Euleana knew what he was going to do, she could read it all over his face and in his body language.

“Crimsy, no...”

“I have to. It’s all we can do.” He replied.

Less than 30 seconds later, Captain Crimson Falcon was clad in his own airtight, gleaming chrome spacesuit with its bulbous, round helmet and dark black rectangular visor, and his dual grappling-hook blaster gripped tightly in his hand.

Euleana glanced wistfully at her lover, then stepped forward and planted a kiss on his helmet, leaving a neon pinkish-purple lipstick mark on it.

“For good luck, dear.” She said, bobbing her head unconsciously and resultantly waving her variously colored, alien head tails about. If she didn’t know any better she would have sworn she saw the shiny, chrome helmet in front of her (that reflected her face like a funhouse mirror) grow a slight tinge of red.

“I’ll come back to you, Euleana, I promise.” Captain Crimson Falcon said. Then, without a further word, he turned, and out the airlock into space he went.

In the blackness of the void, he saw no trace of the vile creature he pursued. He hovered around some space debris and watched and waited. Eventually, the captain jettied slowly between two enormous pieces of debris, one a former window of the Jackhammer, another a remnant of a bay door in the Delphi Station. When he was smack dab between the two pieces of debris, there was a bright flash and they moved together quickly, clamping tightly against either side of him, holding him fast.

“That bastard!” Captain Falcon audibly declared.

His nemesis had quickly and covertly installed a system of mini-rockets on the debris, and when our hero had crossed between them, he tripped a wireless signal that activated them, sending the two pieces of space junk flying together and clamping in on him, trapping him. From around a small piece of twisted space refuse he came: the fake-smile beaming on the helmet of the space suit clad villain who had caused the captain so much pain and loss.

The evil alien wielded a long, jagged, pointy space scrap that he aimed at the captain, meaning to stab him. Luckily, Falcon's arms were free, and the one holding the blaster was on the side of his space prison upon which his opponent also happened to be. He raised his arm, aimed, and fired at the smiling space suit hurling towards him, hitting it several times and knocking it off course, sending him into a spiraling spin.

This gave the hero just enough time to stretch with all his might and reach a button on his belt that produced a bright blue force field bubble when pressed that pushed open the space trap that otherwise would have cleaved him in two just enough for him to wiggle free, before snapping shut again from the force of the glaring mini-rockets.

The space suited villain and his painted smile stabilized, and flew off propelled by jet pack, away from the captain. Falcon activated his own jet pack and flew after him.

They wove in and out of space junk, around former light-jump coils tumbling aimlessly and cold, long-dead, fragmented star ship reactors that would never propel another starship onward or give it energy and heat, getting in whatever potshots at each other from their blaster pistols they could between such debris.

At length, the villain, evidently growing tired of the pursuit, suddenly spun around and flung his arm forward, aiming a laser blaster at the captain's head. Falcon, alarmed and bewildered, darted behind a ball made from support beams that had been twisted into a sphere by the force of one of the collapsing star exploration vehicles, with what he thought were just seconds to spare before a pulse of energy ripped its way through his cranium.

But no such blast came.

Instead, looking overhead, he beheld a rippling, electric beam with a purple hue, which shot far beyond his proximity. He cocked his head, following the beam's path. When he realized what his opponent was doing, it was almost too late.

“Oh shit!”

Our hero, last of but two Star Rangers, bellowed into the starry night. He jetted over to the other side of the scrap metal sphere as quick as he could, hoping the foreign object would absorb the blow. For his opponent had not been firing a blast at him, but rather reeling in one of the bombs that Falcon’s own ship had projected that he had disabled mere minutes ago. As the bomb neared, the opponent shot a hot, red blast from his pistol at the now death-inducingly close bomb, and it erupted in a fiery explosion of energy that spread out in all directions.

The blast hit the sphere of scrap metal, which while absorbing the brunt of the blow, caused it to knock into Captain Falcon with sufficient force to send him tumbling head over heels wildly, uncontrollably, through the abyss. He knocked into yet another jutting, deformed piece of metal, (upon which he was quite lucky he had not been impaled by numerous ragged protrusions,) and one of the thrusters of his jet pack was destroyed against it, rendering it useless, unable to sustain a linear trajectory or make proper course adjustments.

Bracing himself against the uneven metal with lots of sharp points jutting from it all about, the captain was able to stop himself from tumbling. He heard a familiar, evil cackle come crackling over his comm. The villain was taunting him. He scaled the metallic obstacle, pulling himself around and past it in space, until he could see the vile, space-suited, friend-killing thing inching away from him. Falcon had no more propulsion himself. He could not pursue him any further.

The former captain of the Star Rangers bewailed the situation then, blurting out a loud curse to no one but the stars.

Then, an idea, one last, desperate move. He raised his gun hand out and, aiming at the back of the one he pursued, pulled the trigger.

The grappling hook shot out into the dark void, protruding and racing, its three claws opening and careening toward the gleaming but scuffed chrome armor of the enemy.

“I’m almost hooked on...” Captain Crimson Falcon said to himself.

The grappling claw inched closer and closer to his foe, until finally, CLINK! Then, CHINK! The three claws collided with enemy spacesuit chrome and closed around his body.

Inside his space helmet, Captain Falcon was grinning with a crazed, gritted-tooth grin as he hit the retract button.

Swiftly, the space suited man drifted closer and closer to the captain. He was clearly struggling, trying desperately to free himself. He could not. He could merely manage to swivel around, so that he was facing the captain again. Both nemeses looked at each other, glaring without a word as they grew steadily closer, inch by inch.

When at last the evil space man was fully retracted, Captain Crimson Falcon held his enemy out and away from him, still held fast in the grappling hook. With his other hand he formed a fist, reared back, then struck the man in the helmet with as enormous force as he could muster. The helmet popped right off, and flew tumbling into space, off into the debris field to become space junk and join its newly found kindred.

Inside the helmet, and the suit; nothing.

Nothing at all!

The same shrill, evil cackle came broadcasting over the captain’s comm.

Stunned and dismayed, Captain Falcon stood hovering in space, his mouth agape under his helmet. His arms went slack and he let the empty space suit go.

“He must have been controlling it remotely...” the captain thought.

No sooner had he pondered this possibility, then the suit sprang to life again, headless but deadly yet, once more wielding its space-shiv.

The captain ducked out of the way, avoiding the killing stab, but the knife grazed his metallic suit and sliced a long fissure in its side. Falcon then reared and fired several shots of his blaster, turning the suit that had belonged to his now dead friend and crew mate back to stardust.

“Warning! Oxygen depletion and depressurization imminent!” An electronic voice buzzed in his ear. “One minute to depressurization. Getting to a nearby starship is advised.”

This warning beeped over and over as the oxygen drained from Captain Crimson Falcon’s space suit by the second and the dark cold of space began to take him. He looked upward and saw a shimmering, wavy glow, followed by a large starship appearing. It had to be his enemy’s ship, decloaking, unless of course the depleting oxygen was causing him to hallucinate. He blinked his eyes and shook his head to make sure. The ship remained in his field of vision nonetheless. He looked on as the ship moved away and out of the debris field. Soon it would be clear and would jump to light speed, and Captain Falcon would be dead. Things were hopeless.

Then he heard a smooth, high female voice electronically buzz in his ear, and felt a light pressure around his waist.

“I’m hooked on,” the voice said, and then, in a cheerful, loving tone, “just helping you keep your promise.”

Not a thing in the known universe could have warmed his body in the dank cold of space while all the heat was escaping from his suit like her voice did then.

Tilting his chin upward, Captain Falcon saw the space escape pod, and inside it, Euleana in the pilot seat. She was waving and smiling. Glancing down at his waist, he saw the ship’s own grappling hook clutching him. It towed him within range, then he felt himself disappear in the warm energy beam of its transport-ray.

Rematerialized inside their modified escape pod and safe and sound next to Euleana in the cockpit, Captain Crimson Falcon found a renewed sense of urgency. They could still nab this guy. Disable his ship then bring him to justice. He would face trial yet and pay for his crimes.

Euleana brought them within range and fired the last of their missiles. They watched anxiously as the rockets departed, raced across the void, and zoomed toward the large, gray, oblong ship to deliver their payloads. They reached their target, but the lumbering ship managed to maneuver out of the way with deft, sweeping, and admittedly, much to Captain Falcon's chagrin, impressive movements, that took it just outside of the harmful blast radius of each exploding missile. Euleana desperately fired laser, plasma, and pulse cannon all at once, but each ray deflected off the massive ship's surface, apparently by some sort of modified, powerful shield.

The enemy ship tauntingly slipped away, slowly growing smaller as it lay just out of reach, tantalizingly so, and retreated into deep space. Euleana eased off the accelerator, dejectedly.

"It's no use. Even at maximum sub-light speed we can't catch him now. He's already charging his jump drive and will go to lightspeed at any second." She said.

Captain Falcon lowered his head in defeat. The man, or thing, or whatever it was that had invaded his ship in disguise and subsequently murdered his crew and friends in cold blood had eluded him, again.

"I'm so sorry, Crimsy. We're out of everything. We've got nothing else to throw at him. Energy blasts do nothing to his shields and we don't have any more missiles."

The captain closed his eyes tightly, holding back tears with all his might for a moment and took a long sigh before raising his head once more to gaze at his escaping prey. It's aft proton propulsors were already glowing hot, ripe for a lightspeed jump. It would be gone any second.

Then one final, last-ditch, insane idea occurred to him.

He reached over and gently placed his hand on Euleana's shoulder, before delicately sliding it over and downward before resting it on the small of her back. She glanced over at her love, pupils dilating slightly in response to his touch.

"My love," he said, "We do have one."

They both glanced downward at the very same thing, before looking up and into one another's eyes. The look was a knowing, yet grave, grim one. They both understood what had to be done. Neither of them said another word.

The coordinates were laid in. The safeties were shut off. The computer programmed and the failsafes manually overridden. It was settled: the pod's final destination, at the end of the suddenly impromptly plotted crash course, was to be their final attack. It would do just the trick.

They looked into each other's eyes one final time, leaned in for a kiss, then Captain Falcon placed his hand on the lightspeed throttle, and Euleana placed hers atop his. Together they pushed it all the way forward.

A short interval later and the craft's proton propulsors flared and fired brilliantly, and the craft leapt forward, accelerating to light speed, its trajectory aimed directly at the enemy ship.

THE END