

## “The Fall of the Star Rangers”

A Short Story

by

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The distress signal from Delphi Station blurted out in the infinitely vast night of the shining, starry universe. The *Jackhammer* came roaring through the night to answer it. The sleek, silver rocket careened past planet, meteor, comet, and star at alarmingly unimaginable speed. Its long, cylindrical nacelles spewed exotic particle exhaust out their backs on the craft's starboard and port sides, propelling it forward.

The Star Rangers sat in the command center of the rocket, gazing out at the rushing star field through their dark, polarized view slit that was about two meters wide and ran around the circumference of the ship, providing a panoramic view of outside operations from the deck.

Ajax, the pilot, held the wheel tight, periodically flipping switches and blipping buttons to adjust their heading. He smirked a wide smirk beneath his long, curly red beard. The science and medical officer, generic, middle aged male aliens the both of them, stood in the back behind and to either side of the commander's chair, making last minute preparations and squeezing into their flight suits. These two, Jeb and Chip, fumbled with their helmets, accidentally clunking them together. Beside them, the beautiful, fragile looking yet fierce Euleana laughed at their bumbling, throwing her exotic, rainbow colored head tails over her shoulder before tucking them into the collar of her space suit. The security officer then fastened her round, shining helmet with its dark, reflective black visor, the one identical to the rest of the crew's, securely and air-tightly over her head.

The captain sat in his chair, a deep scowl of concentration and consideration on his face as he tapped through the data logs from his command consoles. At length, he stood, moved to where he was in front of everyone except Ajax, whom he remained behind so that the pilot could continue steering with unobstructed vision, and he cleared his throat. All hands on deck (except Ajax, of course!) turned and faced the captain.

“Alright, everyone,” Captain Crimson Falcon said, “We are nearing our destination and I wanted to go over things one last time before we begin.”

His crew nodded and smiled variously at their leader, the tiny green man with three long, green antennae that ran long and slithering out the top of his head, whom they loved and respected.

“The enemy ship is employing some sort of jamming signal that’s not allowing us to teleport anyone in or out of the station. It’s also blocking our fleet ships’ weapons and tractor beams. We’re going to have to do this the old fashioned way.

“Euleana, Jeb, Chip, and I will exit out the airlock in our space suits and hook on to their ship with our blasto-o-grapplers. After we are attached, we will burrow into the hull with the lasers and get in to the bridge of the bogey and stop it that way. Any questions?”

There were none.

“Alright then, let’s get moving!” said Captain Falcon.

“Aye sir!” everyone shouted in unison.

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Captain Falcon stood in the corner, squeezing into his own form-fitting space suit. He addressed the officer sitting with his back to him who was occupied with scrolling numbers and text on a readout screen on the control panel in front of him.

“Marve, are you ready to do your thing?” whispered Captain Falcon.

Marve turned his head to face his captain. Nobody had ever seen his face before, save on his home planet, for his species needed to wear the spacesuit full time, being otherwise unable to survive in an M-class environment like most other humanoid species did. His friends had jokingly spray-painted a red smiley face below the black, reflective visor where a mouth would be.

“Am I!” responded Marve, enthusiastically and sounding self-assured.

“Great. Glad you can do it.”

“Oh, I can do the heck out of it, sir!” Marve said to his captain, and if he could have seen through the mysterious man’s helmet, Captain Falcon imagined he would have seen the face of his crewman, whatever such a face of his species looked like, break into a smile matching the false one on his helmet.

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The light proceeding from the Delphi star shown starkly and brightly, reflecting in shimmering sparkles off the hull of the *Jackhammer* as Captain Falcon, Euleana, Jeb, and Chip stood on it, their grav boots holding them fastened to the surface of the ship.

“Okay, I’ve swung you in close as I can get!” Ajax informed them over their space helmet comms.

“Affirmative. Okay, folks, let’s have at it!” barked Falcon.

One by one, each of the Star Rangers raised the pistol in his or her hands and pulled the green triggers. Silently the guns fired long, straight, silver cables that had three-clawed grappling hooks attached to them. The hooks careened across the 450 meter gap between *Jackhammer* and the long, sleek, black alien saucer. Already they could see the dismay on the faces of the

Zorgoboffan captain and helmsman inside the enemy ship's translucent domed bridge, their spherical eyes widening and darting about atop their green, slimy eyestalks as they realized they were under attack.

The grappling claws passed over a chasm between the space station that lay smoldering in the barrage of laser bolts the black enemy ship was firing at them, before landing with a great force and embedding their sharp hooked ends deep into the ebony hull. The impact would have made a thud or a ding, were it not for the soundless, airless vacuum of space.

"I'm hooked on!" Euleana announced.

"I'm almost hooked on!" Captain Falcon, who had fired his own pistol just a couple seconds after Euleana, announced.

His hook then impacted with the alien saucer and his indicator light blinked green. He immediately hit the retract button on his weapon simultaneously with the off button of his grav boots, and was pulled with great force into space and off the *Jackhammer*, zooming towards the enemy ship. Chip and Jeb followed some 10 meters behind him, having hit their buttons a few seconds after him. He gazed forward at Euleana's space suit in front of him by 3 or 4 meters, and briefly glanced her over, admiring her feminine curves, though he would not allow himself to admit doing or feeling so about her.

Out of the corner of his eye, the crew thought they saw a bright, fluttering, spherical glimmer there in the void, which shot like a shooting star from *Jackhammer* towards the saucer. Euleana blinked her eyes and squinted, but it was gone. Must have been some sort of optical illusion.

Euleana's feet landed with a silent thud on the black surface and she switched her grav boots back on. Captain Falcon landed a half second after her. Both gazed up and backward, expecting their comrades to be close behind. To their horror, they were not.

Chip had, mid-flight, activated his rocket boosters and knocked into Jeb, causing him to let go his pistol, which blinked a red warning light, and go spinning uncontrollably into the void.

"Aha, so *he* was the traitor among us!" Captain Falcon declared, and he acted fast. With one blast from his blasto-o-grappler he severed Chip's line to the ship, and with the second bright, green energy burst, he vaporized him.

Meanwhile, Euleana shot her own grappling hook to Jeb, who she caught, the grappling hook's three claws squeezing around his stomach, just before he would have been beyond the range of help, and reeled him back in. The crew caught their breaths for a second then continued on along the hull. They couldn't afford to waste any more time or to slow down and contemplate the treachery. They had to make it to the coordinates where they could forge a tunnel that would take them to the bridge.

When they arrived, they pointed their pistols down towards the hull and fired, sending green cutting beams forth that burrowed into the ship.

A panel slid open some meters away and they came out: the slithering, slimy, green beings who could breathe in space and feasted on humanoid life force. Euleana and Jeb turned and began shooting them, while their captain continued digging into the hull, bits and pieces of which flew upward and away from them, into space.

"Crimson!" Euleana shrieked. The captain whirled around to see the horror: a tentacled arm's suction cups had plastered against his crewmate's helmet. Jeb screamed as his life force was drained from him. They couldn't see it, but had before on other missions in distant quadrants

during this raging, ruthless war; they knew the man was growing smaller, frailer, emaciated as he was being drank, turning all the while to dust inside his suit.

“MARVE! NOW WOULD BE A GREAT TIME!” the captain screeched into his comm.

“Alright!” Marve said, from inside the alien saucer.

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The Zorgoboffans on the bridge of the black saucer all heard the electronic space-suit voice of the man and swiveled around, confused. There, in the middle of the command center, a silver space suit clad man with an eerie, fake smile glossed onto the helmet arose from behind a control panel. They were horrified and began running, having no time to think about where he had come from or how he had gotten there. He opened fire on them, vaporizing each and every officer on that bridge, before firing a controlled burst of green energy around the edges of the doors, sealing other enemies out.

The Zorgoboffans retreated from the hull, back into the black panel and into the ship, having been recalled, their officers positively furious that they had been duped!

In space, Marve’s crewmates could see their friend’s victory through the translucent dome over the bridge. He was now in full control of the ship, which had stopped firing its lasers on Delphi station, and was now moving away from the station and towards *Jackhammer*.

“Great job, Marve! Well played!” said Captain Falcon. “Glad to see your hacking job was successful and you got their teleportation jamming signal deactivated without them noticing. Great work!”

“Thank you, Crimson.” came another voice from the bridge and Marve’s suit. But it wasn’t Marve’s.

Euleana’s smile vanished as her feelings went from impressed surprise and delight at her captain and friend’s heretofore secret plan, and her face shifted into a wrinkled worry. She and Captain Crimson Falcon exchanged a perturbed glance. They watched as the ship they stood on now accelerated quickly towards their own!

“Marve?” Captain Falcon asked, helplessly.

The third party agent impersonating Marve didn’t reply with words, only with a high, shrill cackling as he pushed the Zorgoboffan ship into the unsuspecting *Jackhammer*. Ajax realized what was happening too late. He struggled uselessly with the throttle to no avail. As the alien ship collided with *Jackhammer*, shattering the command center window slit, Ajax let out a blood curdling cry.

Captain Falcon and Euleana leapt off the black ship not a moment too soon, jetting into space with their rocket boots and towards Delphi station. Glancing back, Falcon saw the smiling man in a space suit burst forth and out into deep space from the same panel their enemies had previously come through, rocketing into the dark unknown, propelled by a jetpack. Just afterward the ships’ reactors exploded, destroying them both in a violent gas and shrapnel filled eruption of colors all over the visible spectrum. Lucky for the two remaining Space Rangers, they had just avoided incineration by the blast’s shockwave, having made it safely within range of Delphi Station’s shield.

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The investigators from the Intergalactic Police found charred remnants of the real Marve’s body among the wreckage.

“Looks like he’d been ambushed in his quarters overnight, stripped of his life suit, then stuffed into a locker. Spy took his place in his suit and we were never the wiser.” the blue-skinned detective told a mournful, angry Captain Crimson Falcon in one of Delphi Station’s many briefing rooms. “He hacked you all and used the same method he employed against the Zorgoboffans to teleport aboard unnoticed.”

“Whose side was he from?” the captain asked, stifling angry, hurt tears.

“Neither ours nor Zorgoboff’s. Entirely different team. They call themselves the Inner Core Syndicate. Criminal organization bent on running the galaxy.”

Falcon had heard of them before. They wreaked havoc everywhere, trying to take control of the galaxy’s commerce through strategically targeted destruction. His ship had just been one of several such targets, its destruction effected to sway the economy through the outcome of political turmoil and uncertainty.

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They told him he could not go track down Marve’s murderer. He told them Marve was his best friend and crewmate and deserved justice. They did not care. He was to let the appropriate authorities deal with it, go to his new ship and crew, and carry out his next orders and mission. They told him to do all this. He did not care.

Captain Falcon hijacked an escape pod and launched it from Delphi Station in the middle of the night, when the deck lights were dimmed and evening shift was on duty, ignoring the inquiries, commands, and then pleas coming over the comm from the station as he rocketed across space. He vowed to find that smiling space suited man, to destroy him, and that he would do so if it were the last thing he did, after scouring each and every star and planet.



“Not without me you’re not.” said a familiar female voice. Bewildered, he turned around to see Euleana sitting in the seat behind him in the pod. She was wearing a tight-fitting spandex jumpsuit that had nebula and star patterns that looked like spray paint strewn all about it. “Oh, don’t look so surprised,” the woman said, tossing her rainbow colored head tails over her shoulder. “I knew you’d never allow me to come, risking my life and career. So I stowed away. I entered the pod behind you real quietly and you didn’t even notice. Ninja skills of a Star Rangers security officer, what can I say?” Captain Falcon smiled. Then he laughed. He was happy she was with him. Then he pulled the lever and jumped to light speed, streaking across the galaxy into the stars beyond that sector just before the space station behind was able to finalize its lock on them with its tractor beam.

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Right before he jumped, a silvery space suited man with a bright red, painted smile ducked out from behind a piece of floating, rotating debris in the wreckage of the two desecrated former ships. He glanced upward and saw Falcon and Euleana’s pod turn into a long, bright flare as it leapt away. Then he fired the retro rockets on his jetpack, making his way slowly to Delphi Station, completely undetected, and cackling shrilly and evilly all the way.